

# **KICKING AGAINST THE PRICKS**

**MARGARET ATWOOD'S ART(I)FACE(S)**

What emerges from this volume is that Atwood is to words as a pig is to mud. She's probably one of those people for whom oral sex means the invention of a new metaphor. But is there anything of value under the fancy footwork? Can she be taken, uh, *seriously*?

Margarets Atwood. Review of *Second Words*  
*Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, 253.

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## Abstract

"Margaret Atwood", claim the Margarets Atwood in a review of their book, *Second Words*, is not one person, but "a front for a committee" (McCombs, ed. 251). This thesis examines some of the faces of Margaret Atwood's artistry. It is governed by the premise that Atwood's work embodies the subversive strategies of a feminine *sexuality*. Hers is a (feminine) subversion *on every level*:: formal, linguistic, historical and thematic. Atwood replies to the phallogocentric logos and the phallogocentric "I" by kicking against the pricks. It is a resistance that is both multiple and strategic. Therefore, my feminist post-structuralist approach to Atwood's multiplicities takes as its basis the rhizomatic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Rather than the centered metaphor of the well-wrought urn of textual modernity, the rhizome is an overground and underground metaphor; an identification of a proliferation of roots and shoots that are uncentered and endless. It is a metaphor that is both appropriate and applicable to the form and content of Atwood's work. This thesis, then, focuses on four major rhizomatic threads -- ways of seeing, language, the body, and desire -- in a comprehensive selection of both poetry and prose works. The irreducibility of Atwood's texts to a singular approach demands an equally strategic critical positionality. These readings, therefore, are not necessarily theoretically compatible, but they are definitely not mutually exclusive. Thus, the rhizomatics of this work echoes the *contra-dictory* complexity of that elusive Atwoodian beast.

## Abbreviations

### Margaret Atwood

- BE* *Bluebeard's Egg*
- BH* *Bodily Harm*
- CE* *Cat's Eye*
- DG* *Dancing Girls*
- EW* *The Edible Woman*
- HT* *The Handmaid's Tale*
- MD* *Murder in the Dark*
- S* *Surfacing*
- SP* *Selected Poems*
- SPH* *Selected Poems II 1976-86*
- SW* *Second Words*
- TS* *True Stories*

### Hélène Cixous

- CD?* "Castration or Decapitation?"
- LM* "The Laugh of the Medusa"
- Ss* "Sorties"

### Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

- OTL* *On The Line*

### Elizabeth Grosz

- JL* *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*
- SS* *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*

### Luce Irigaray

- Spec* *Speculum of the Other Woman*
- SØ* "This Sex Which Is Not One"
- WE* "Women's Exile"

### Julia Kristeva

- DL* *Desire In Language*
- RPL* *Revolution in Poetic Language*

## Chronology of Poems

With one exception, all the poems discussed are contained in two comprehensive collections of Atwood's poetry: *Selected Poems (SP)* and *Selected Poems II 1976-86 (SPII)*. As these volumes may not be readily available, each reference is preceded by the date of the collection from which it is drawn.

1966	<i>The Circle Game</i>
1968	<i>The Animals In That Country</i>
1970	<i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i>
1970b	<i>Procedures for Underground</i>
1971	<i>Power Politics</i>
1974	<i>You Are Happy</i>
1978	<i>Two Headed Poems</i>
1981	<i>True Stories</i>
1984	<i>Interlunar</i>
1985-6	<i>New Poems</i>

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## **EPI(PRO)LOGUE**

And if we gave to this exchange, for its (germinal) title, the word *positions*, whose polysemia is marked, moreover, in the letter *s*, the "disseminating" letter *par excellence*, as Mallarmé said? I will add, concerning *positions*: scenes, acts, figures of dissemination.

Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 96.

We are great categorizers and pigeonholers in our society, and one reason is to put people safely into pigeonholes and then dismiss them, thinking we have thereby summed them up. "Feminist" is to me an adjective that does not enclose one.

*Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 136.



THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME

It was taken some time ago.  
At first it seems to be  
a smeared  
print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan  
it, you see in the left-hand corner  
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree  
(balsam or spruce) emerging  
and, to the right, halfway up  
what ought to be a gentle  
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,  
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center  
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where  
precisely, or to say  
how large or small I am:  
the effect of water  
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,  
eventually  
you will be able to see me.)

This work is not a photograph of Margaret Atwood. Neither does it purport to "see" her in her entirety. Rather it is a de-centered series of glimpses of an elusive subject. "This Is a Photograph of Me" (1966: *SP*, 6), the first poem in the first book of (authorially) selected poems (and the first poem of *The Circle Game* -- her first "mature" work), is an appropriate point of departure, since it so aptly demonstrates Atwood's writerly concerns; a poem in which form is inseparable from content; a poem that teasingly provokes and confounds our complacent textual sensibilities; a poem that demands our conceptual and intellectual participation. The speaker encourages us to see something that is not there. Directing and *constructing* our vision, her<sup>1</sup> poetic discourse is testimony to Lacan's infamous assertion the "the world of words creates the world of

things". Language and vision are conflated as the scanning of the photograph is associated with the scanning of poetry; the print of the photographic negative with the printed text on the page. The empirical evidence of specular knowledge is, however, undermined as the speaker presents a series of unstable impressions. Initially, the photograph "*seems to be / a smeared print*"; closer inspection reveals "*a thing that is like a branch*", part of a tree that could be *either* "*(balsam or spruce)*" and a house that is situated "*halfway up / what ought to be a gentle slope*". The conventional precision of the photographic image is destabilised by the poetic and visual process: everything is "emerging". Meaning is attainable -- it is there "just under the surface" -- but what we comprehend, and therefore what we see, implicitly depends on our own position, on who and what we are. And an ambiguous, shifting positionality is what characterises the speaker in the poem. She is, she claims, within the image, but she relates this information from *alongside us*; directing our attention, she is at once viewed and viewer, simultaneously beside us, "in the background" *and* "in the center". Flickering verb tenses undermine even the fixity of temporal limits. Nothing is precise; all is distorted. The poem presents an implicit distrust of mechanistic vision; a picture, like a language, gives a particular view and not a universal one. The photograph is a two-dimensional distortion of three-dimensional reality, just as language is a verbal distortion of the Real; a distortion reflected in "*the effect of water / on light*". We are presented with the flattened image of the pictorial plane and encouraged to venture under the surface, by peering into the parenthetical depths. And the depths are, of course, disconcerting. The penultimate disruption is the speaker's cool relation of her own demise. Like Emily Dickinson's poem 465, "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died" (223-4), the description of a rather banal daily occurrence -- the perusal of a picture -- is utterly destabilised by the context in which it is placed. Thus, Atwood confounds our expectations of imagistic reportage with an emphatic statement of logical contradiction and its accompanying disruption of propriety, convention and textual security. How can the speaker be in the photograph -- drowned -- and beside us, presumably alive? How can she be simultaneously present and absent, above and below the surface, alive and dead?

Such is Atwood's writerly strategy, and the subversive effects of her textual depths. As the poem ironically affirms, as readers we can anticipate nothing with any certainty. Hers is not a discourse of "either/or" but of "both/and": a networking of *différance*. She approaches her topics in "a crabwise, scuttling, and devious feminine manner" (SW, 414). An *approach*, never an arrival, never a journey's end. Atwood's texts -- and indeed, her whole corpus -- do not present a schema of logical, linear progression culminating in a pre-determined goal, but rather an interrelated web of discursive threads. Her formal and thematic concerns are rhizomatic; a network of roots and shoots that endlessly proliferate, breaking off and re-connecting, moving out in all

directions. Any attempt to isolate one tendril in this network soon collapses under the weight of inseparable systemic branches. The potato is a rhizome; kikuyu is a rhizome, twitch is a rhizome. Atwood's strategy -- her textual structuring principle -- is that of the rhizome. Hers is the (feminine) weed in the carefully cultivated (masculine) garden, and like those weeds, her textual proliferation is irrepressible. *Rhizomatics* then, determines both the focus and the form of this discussion. Deleuze and Guattari appropriate this term from the discourse of botany to describe the (privileged) literature of modernity, contrasting it with the binary logic of "the root book", that of "the oldest and most worn out thought" (*OTL*, 5-6). Unlike the latter's adherence to the mimetic One, the former is characterised by connection and heterogeneity, by multiplicity, by map-making<sup>2</sup>: "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, as one finds in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines" (15). Rhizomes are neither pivotal nor concentric, rhizomes are ex-centric. Their strength derives from an organic principle of self-generation: "A rhizome can be cracked or broken at any point; it starts off again following one or another of its lines, or even other lines" (17-18). Rhizomatic theory therefore has obvious affinities with Derrida's "concept" of *différance*. Derrida refers to this general system as a "sheaf", one that has "the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning -- or of force -- to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others" ("*Différance*", 3). This is exactly the operative principle in Atwood's textual corpus. Her work should not be viewed in terms of the development of linear structure of building block modules, but in terms of an interlacing of disseminating tendrils with no discernible points of departure or termination; tendrils that pierce and re-pierce the geographic (textual) surface. The rhizome is, it should be remembered, both a terranean and sub-terranean phenomenon. Atwood does not examine an issue and then discard it, but returns to it from another direction, on another line. Her map-making is a process of palimpsestic modifications. Deleuze's and Guattari's crucial rhizomatic identification is therefore just as crucial to an Atwoodian discussion: 'Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entrances. . . . Contrary to a tracing, which always returns to the "same," a map has multiple entrances' (26). Any discussion of her work can therefore only be equally palimpsestic, open to emendation, unexclusive of alternate routes. Atwood's "maps" are of a Cubist persuasion. As readers, we are presented with the simultaneity of multiple views. As the shifting images of "This Is a Photograph of Me" so subtly demonstrate, the fixity of single point perspective only hampers the vision. Like Atwood's project, the Cubist project is a de-centered and de-centering one. It dispenses with the conventional rules of mimesis in favour of the pictorial interrogation of the totality of the object rendered. Considering Atwood's own affinities with the visual medium, the metaphor is an apt one. Just as her positionality is constantly

shifting, so is our own; Atwood sometimes leads us up the garden path, but she *always* leads us *around the back* and *under the surface*.

Atwood plays with those critics who attempt to close the space of her writing in teleological summation. More than willing to discuss the politics and process of the writer's art she is always evasive about her own product.<sup>3</sup> Her interviews are an art form in themselves, as she skilfully avoids authorial interpretative sanction and categorically dismisses autobiographical readings. Such readings, according to Atwood, turn process into product. She demonstrates the inappropriateness of this approach in a typically laconic reply to an interviewer eager to discover the "deep personal symbolism" of the many drownings in her work: "I grew up by a lake. People drowned in it. I know some people who have drowned, or nearly drowned. Canada is full of water" (Hancock, 273). In any case, any attempt to maintain a stable readerly position is as doomed to failure as this hopeful interviewer's naive question. Playing with the expectations we bring to texts Atwood exposes our own complacency:

Her eyes gleam, sometimes a little wickedly, for although my mother is sweet and old and a lady, she avoids being a sweet old lady. When people are in danger of mistaking her for one, she flings in something from left field; she refuses to be taken for granted.  
(BE, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother", 17)

And Atwood's texts, like the mother in this story, rather wickedly refuse to be taken for granted. In both her poetry and her fiction ironic inversions and associative word plays disturb assumed contextual safety. As Irigaray says of women's relationship to language:

One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "*other meaning*" which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilised.  
(SØ, 103)

Stasis is summarily rejected. Atwood writes beyond the ending; *her* end is in beginning, again and again.

Stepping into Atwood's textual realm is to step into a game of "Murder in the Dark" (MD, 29-30). The description of the game is also a game in itself, as the possible roles of writer, reader and book are ironically posited, and the cloak and dagger drama of the (masculine) detective story is parodically evoked. In each scenario, however, the writer is the murderer, the one who must always lie. The stability offered by the conventionally reliable narrator is undermined; at any moment we may be pounced upon, at every moment we are plotted against. "That's me in the dark", says the author/narrator, "I have designs on you." Quite simply, there is no vantage point from which we can safely view this play, no space free from the danger of feminine designs; willingly or unwillingly we are part of the game of deception. *Murder in the Dark* is thus representative of Atwood's

textual strategy, a strategy of artifice (*OED*: device; contrivance; (piece of) cunning; address, skill). It's no accident that *artifice* derives from *artificium*: the art of making. Atwood's *is* a piece of cunning; she makes an art of the making of art. Adopting the role of murderer, Atwood assumes many disguises, disguises that can be utilised and just as readily exchanged or discarded. And her parody of the Dick Tracy school of private investigation extends to her own self-conscious adoption of this conventional pose. The cover of *Murder in the Dark* is further testimony to Atwood's multi-faceted artistry: her own symbolic *collage*. It is a pictorial pastiche in which she herself is the furtive figure wearing the sunglasses and trench coat of the stereotypical villain. The image foregrounds the experience that the collection offers: an entry into a game of question and evasion that is continuously pervaded by the possibility of being stabbed in the back. Our participation is crucial but our own positions are neither protected nor securely exempted from the bounds of this textual play. Watching our backs we must be constantly aware that "truth" is only ever relative:

Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you've  
turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie.  
Now: do you believe me?

Atwood is a murderer -- a textual deconstructionist -- but her project is productive rather than reductive: "As murderer, she breaks down traditional structures, deconstructs language, because only through such deconstruction can new structures begin to rise" (Irvine, "Murder and Mayhem", 59-60). Even on a formal level -- let alone a contential one -- Atwood's project is essentially a feminist one. Hers is a strategic positionality, a progression by side-step, a continual rejection of a unitary meaning and/or viewpoint. And as Atwood's comments to Fitz Gerald and Crabbe illustrate, even her feminism is uncategorisable (136). For her, "feminism" is not something one can draw a line around and step inside (Hammond, "A Margaret Atwood Interview", 75).<sup>4</sup> Clearly, subjecting her work to one exclusive feminist or theoretical approach is at the expense of a wealth of provocative material. Hers is not one well-aimed kick at a world view and a language dominated by the symbolic Father, but a series of strikes -- of rebuttals -- against an order that constructs and defines women according to a masculine (phallic) normative model. Atwood's is a deconstructionist critique both of the innate metaphoricity of language and of the hierarchised binary oppositions that identify the feminine as inherently lacking. Like the deconstructionist project, this resistance is provisional and continual. As Derrida says, deconstruction is not a once and for all activity (*Positions*, 42). The strategic nature of Atwood's interrogations demands an equally strategic response; therefore, whilst the approaches contained in this work certainly are not mutually exclusive, they also are not necessarily theoretically compatible. But this is the very point. Since this discussion is based on the premise of subversion on every level then I am not unduly disconcerted by the implicit subversion of my own critical stance. *Her* name is Legion, hence the need



for a form of schizo-analysis. Playing the game on Atwood's terms, I enter the play at a particular point, withdraw and re-enter from another of a multiplicity of entrances.

Whilst Atwood, in Barthesian fashion, revels in "the sumptuous rank of the signifier" (Barthes, 65), she is also aware of the restrictions of language; of a discourse governed by the Symbolic Law of the Father. For the feminine, the entry into language - into the Symbolic Law of the Phallus -- is a profoundly alienating initiation. The obligatory socio-symbolic contract fosters the hierarchised binary terms of presence and absence (and of sexual opposition). In itself, the reinforced identification of these distinctions need not necessarily have dramatic consequences; in the context of the social meaning *ascribed* to those distinctions the consequences are huge. The structuring role of the Oedipal complex in the constitution of subjectivity cannot be overemphasised: the binary model of presence and absence identifies men as having, and women as lacking, the privileged genital configuration, the sign of the Father's power. The identification offers a wealth of disempowering implications. Although Lacan affirms that the Phallus - the emblem of the law of language itself -- represents a state of full and transcendental presence that none can possess or achieve, the relation of Sameness between the real penis and the imaginary Phallus cannot help but reinforce a patriarchally dominated social structure. As Jane Gallop so succinctly says: "But as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which refers to and can be confused . . . with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not" (97). What is in fact an arbitrary linkage is covered over, veiled, as "the penis comes to function as the signified for the phallic signifier" (Grosz, *JL*, 123). The phallus envelops the penis in a presumptuous conflation, with the insidious effect of the naturalisation of masculine dominance. Atwood is more than aware of this "minor" conflation. Considering her implicit preference for a visual sign system, it is not insignificant that her most obvious phallic *cuntention* occurs in the story "Sunrise" (*BE*). Here, the painter Yvonne merely reflects (and thus exposes) a veiled assumption of power:

All Yvonne did at the time was to stick the penises onto men's bodies more or less the way they really were, and erect into the bargain. "I don't see what the big deal was," she can say, still ingenuously. "I was only painting hard-ons. Isn't that what every man wants? The police were just jealous." She goes on to add that she can't make out why, if a penis is a good thing, calling someone a penis-brain is an insult.  
(245)

It is hardly surprising that Yvonne's paintings elicit such a vehement masculine response. A picture paints a thousand (subversive) words.

But the assumed presence of this transcendental attribute (and its absence in the female body) leads to the assumed self-presence of linguistic usage. The Word, like the Phallus, is *His* -- phallogocentrism. Although the opacity of language is always formally

acknowledged, the metaphysics of presence still pervade the cultural spectrum. Lacan repeatedly reminds us that the world of words creates the world of things. Ah yes, but *whose* words and *whose* worlds? Language is inherently unstable but this free play is held captive by a phallogocentric authority: "There is no mother tongue, but a seizure of power by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a diocese, a capital" (OTL, 13). The religion of the patriarchal Fathers. It is a religion in which illegitimacy is the most heinous of crimes; a crisis of legitimation never disturbs the tranquil surface of *this* economy. Illicit infractions are vigilantly prevented; paternity is never questioned; the meaning/ the son is *always* the Father's progeny. Patrilinearity is the order of *this* discourse. There is no coincidence in the fact that bastardy is synonymous with being without a father, without a name, without *benefit* of clergy. But where is the mother in this regulatory ontology? Absent. Submitting to paternal authority, the *sub-ject* is always masculine. The Law is transmitted in the descent of Man. But this legitimised descent is not without dissent; a patrilinear genealogy is not the only possibility. The Word is not sacrosanct. Women must enter the Symbolic but we need not submit to a structure that is founded on our exclusion. It is an imperative that Atwood readily acknowledges -- writers cannot avoid using language -- but she also acknowledges that women's relation to language -- to the social order -- is not unproblematic (O'Brien, 181-2).

Atwood does not seek the security of paternal/religious sanction -- *Bless me father for I have sinned* -- but instead "preaches" an heretical ethics of transgression. If legitimate progeny characterises the phallogocentric logos, then Atwood is the bastard who disrupts the sanctity of the familial plot; the feminine ghost who haunts the masculine machine. Taking His Word, she refuses to become a *member* of His phallogocentric club. "Siren Song" (1974: SP, 195-6), suggests both the imprisoning nature of a masculine narrative and the seductive irresistibility of the feminine voice. She is the *femme fatale* -- the Babylonian whore -- of masculine desire but the role is not one of her own adoption: "I don't enjoy it here / squatting on this island / looking picturesque and mythical." The siren's words, like Circe's in the following cycle, are the underside of the Homeric logos; the presentation of *an other* point of view. Atwood's particular poetic *nekuia* brings blood to the ghosts in Homer's narrative, giving voice to the silent, visibility to the unseen (the siren's appearance is not her own, but the "bird-suit" of masculine phantasy). In *The Odyssey*, Circe never speaks and the siren's song constitutes only a danger to the intrepid hero. Cixous' comment on Odysseus' heroic activity echoes the poem's implicit derision: "How banal! To resist the Sirens, he ties himself up! to a mast! a little phallus and a big phallus too . . . (NBW, 74). It is significant that in Atwood's poem the siren's murderous words are this time successful, a success that derives from her deviously seductive appeal to masculine vanity. The

seduction, however, effects something rather more final than a *petit-mort*. As Dilliot suggests: "The desire of man to believe he is unique, his insistent clinging to a sense of individuality is what allows lies to deceive him and to destroy him" (81). Thus, the siren turns his language and his desire against him.

His Word is subjected to a ruthless interrogation, with unsettling and subversive effects. "Simmering" (*MD*, 31-3), exposes the arbitrary nature of linguistic metaphoricity in a gesture of comic deconstruction. Here, the masculine adventure is moved to the realms of the kitchen; it is an ironic inversion that gains its humour from the transposition of conventionally (sexually) marked language:

Indeed, sexual metaphor was changing: bowls and forks became prominent, and *eggbeater*, *pressure cooker* and *turkey baster* became words which only the most daring young women, the kind who thought it was a kick to butter their own toast, would venture to pronounce in mixed company.

This comic reversal convincingly illustrates the binary logic that fuels the phallogocentric order, an order that constitutes men and masculine activities as the privileged measure of social significance. But Atwood reveals that the hierarchisation and the logic are nothing more than a theoretical fiction, one that constructs and reinforces masculine dominance. Language is inherently marked: "You can't take another poem of spring, not with the wound-up vowels, not with the bruised word green in it, not yours, not with ants crawling all over it, not this infestation" ("Mute", *MD*, 49). But Atwood does take this infested word and she plays games with it (a linguistic food fight?) She allows metaphor to "lead [her] by the nose" with often startling semantic results ("Women's Novels", *MD*, 36). Buying a bruised logos, she effects a miraculous regeneration: "Disconnecting words, making new connections in the linguistic system, intervening in the semantic events she produces, the woman writer questions what is 'natural' to reveal therein a male fiction" (Godard, "Epi(pro)logue", 324).

Atwood's subversion is not only confined to linguistic conventions but also to formal narrative conventions. Texts do not proceed according to logical (patri)linear progression, but rather, according to an oblique and associative logic. Temporal and geographic consistency is interrupted; narratives are continuously disrupted and de-centered by the insistent demands of a feminine unconscious. Ambiguity abounds: the question of the survival of the protagonists in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is never resolved; the origin of the voices that address us is neither obvious nor transparently clear<sup>5</sup>; italicised words and interpolated memories and voices dislocate the writerly space. The work may end, but the text rhizomes on for the reader. To consider these questions is, of course, part of the critical project; to expect a unitary "solution" is both specious and reductive. Rhizomatics do not yield to the "hierarchical graphs" of the "phallus tree"; rather the critical fruit lies in:

treating the unconscious as an a-centred system, that is, as a machinic network of finite automata (rhizomes) . . . The important thing is never to reduce the unconscious, to interpret it or make it signify following the tree model, but rather *to produce the unconscious*, and along with it, new utterances and other desires. The rhizome is precisely this production of the unconscious.  
(OTL, 39-40)

Atwood's texts are uncompromisingly rhizomatic; they produce the unconscious. To seek an authoritative meaning in a discourse that is heterogenously fluid can only ever be doomed to failure. Her texts, like the rhizomatic play of *différance*, disavow sovereign (teleological) interpretation:

What I call *text* is also that which "practically" inscribes and overflows the limits of such a discourse [of truth, essence]. *There is* such a general text everywhere that (that is, everywhere) this discourse and its order (essence, sense, truth, meaning, consciousness, ideality, etc.) are *overflowed*, that is, everywhere that their authority is put back into the position of a *mark* in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern.  
(Derrida, *Positions*, 59-60)

Thus to the *i* of the title of my discussion: that sequestered letter in the middle of artifice. *I will speak therefore of a letter*, but it is the dead letter of the Law. The "I"; that nostalgic authority of the Cartesian *cogito*, the signifier of the unified subject-presumed-to-know, a subjectivity crucial to the production of "rational" (non-poetic) discourse. I will attend to this letter but only to reduce it to its "proper" lower-case dimensions. Rhizomes have nothing to do with this aggrandised signifier of phallogocentric authority. Rhizomes are "without a General, without an organizing memory or central autonomy"; rhizomes are not beings, rhizomes are becomings (OTL, 49). Atwood's "authorities" are thus non-authoritative -- characters are continually disrupted by their own unconscious imperatives -- and even our own supposed authority is questioned. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, a fictional character, creates *us*: "I tell, therefore you are" (279). Liminal boundaries are continually overflowed. (In *Lady Oracle*, the protagonist's life starts to merge with and be constructed by the fictional Gothic romances that her "other self" produces.) The "I" is Atwood's (and my) bone of *cuntention*: the "I" of masculine mythology, that little signifier so central to the shoring up of Western metaphysics and of the phallogocentric ethos, is here reduced to merely another mark in the signifying chain. Atwood, like Gallop, raises the veil of the Father's Word and discovers the prick at the centre of phallogocentrism (Gallop, 29).<sup>6</sup> It is surely symbolic that this insignificant letter occupies the centre of a word that signifies deception and contrivance. And even this centrality is disturbed by "the 'disseminating' letter *par excellence*" (Derrida, *Positions*, 96). Rhizomes, like this letter, are polysemic:

The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: "and . . . and . . . and . . ." In this conjunction

there is enough force to shake up and uproot the verb "to be." Where  
are you going? Where are you coming from? what are you driving at?  
All useless questions.  
(OTL, 57-8)

Thus, the One of phallogocentric discourse becomes inconsequential in the face of the Other -- the logic of *and* -- the more than One. Atwood's art is not one face, nor is it even a Janus-like duality, rather it is a network of facings that are constantly changing and connecting, continuously on the move. Atwood *approaches* the topic of the Father's self-present progeny (SW, 414); she solicits His representative and His Word. Derrida uses this term in his discussion of *différance*: *différance* solicits the domination of ontological presence. He uses *solicit* in the etymological sense of *sollicitare*: to agitate, "to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety" ("Différance", 21). Whilst Derrida returns to the sign's root origins, Atwood's usage has a more contemporary dissemination: *What d'ya haul her downtown for, Doc?* Soliciting. Derrida's *différance* challenges the regal limits of the kingdom; Atwood's *différance* challenges the sex-cops of the signifier. Whilst her words shake the phallogocentric logos, hers is a provocative agitation. Not to put too fine a point on it, Atwood is a prickteaser: *Wanna spend some money? Why don't you come up and see me sometime?* Encouraging them to rise to the bait, she laughs them into deflation. Kicking against the pricks need not necessarily come to blows.

Atwood makes a mockery of the phantasised plot; hers is literally play-writing, the creation of an alternative drama. Fringe theatre. Parodies abound as the authority of master narratives -- even Atwoodian narratives -- is undercut. "Circe/Mud Poems" and "Men at Sea" deride conventional adventurers: phallogocentric culture heroes (1974: SP, 201-23; 1985-6: SPII, 161). Both Hutcheon and Grace have noted that images and events in *Lady Oracle* parody the themes Atwood identifies in her critical guide to Canadian literature, *Survival* (Hutcheon, 145-6; Grace, 123-4). Atwood's is the satiric comedy of parodic discourse, an hilarious "critique of the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word" (Bakhtin, 55). In Bakhtinian terms, her work is "*too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (55). Hers is the discourse of contra-diction as she introduces the heterogeneity of a feminine economy. Comic critiques collude with comic deconstructions as "obtuse" speakers lead masculine semantics to a point of aporia:

There are other colours, pink for instance: pink is supposed to weaken  
your enemies, make them go soft on you, which must be why it's used  
for baby girls. It's a wonder the military haven't got onto this. Pale  
pink helmets, with rosettes, a whole battalion, onto the beachhead,  
over the top in pink.  
(CE, 43)

Obviously, the result is a drama of carnivalesque proportions. Atwood plays *phallophor* in the phallogocentric plot, a modernised version of "the figures who carried carved

*phalloi* in religious processions and whose role was to joke and cavort obscenely" (Bakhtin, 57n). Over the top; the subversive art of outrageous feminine mimicry. Taking the language of Man, Atwood produces linguistic obscenities. As Kristeva says: "A playful language therefore gives rise to a law that is overturned, violated and pluralized" ("A New Kind of Intellectual: The Dissident", 295). And Atwood's dissidence resides in the textual efficacy of laughter; the poetic discourse of the *avant-garde*: "When practice is not laughter, there is nothing new; where there is nothing new, practice cannot be provoking: it is at best a repeated, empty act" (Kristeva, *RPL*, 225). Hers is the laugh of the "deadly" Medusa. Feminine laughter shatters the order that would make of "her" a hole, a lack, darkest Africa, and exposes that identification as a presumptuous assertion of masculine truth:

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.  
(Cixous, LM, 258)

As phallophor, as prickteaser, as rhizomatic strategist, Atwood's work reveals the doubled discourse of feminism: the complicity with, and critique of, the Father's Symbolic order. Jane Gallop's suggestive textual infidelities inform this discussion; rhizomatic tendrils that are so appropriate to Atwood's language and themes. Gallop claims that women's relation to the Symbolic should be -- indeed only ever can be -- a duplicitous one: ". . . knowingly, lucidly to exercise and criticize power is to dephallicize, to assume the phallus and unveil that assumption as presumption, as fraud. A constantly double discourse is necessary, one that asserts and then questions" (122). Women must acknowledge that even in speaking, we are marginalising ourselves; within the Symbolic, we are always figuratively outside it, its liminal boundary. It is a contradictory positionality, but one that has subversively productive implications. Therefore, my own theoretical and critical positionality, like Atwood's, is that of a resisting rather than assenting subject; a continual interrogation of the terms with which I/we work.<sup>7</sup> Unfaithfulness is both a possibility and a feminine prerogative, one that elides and derides the need to prove paternity and (patri)linearity:

Infidelity then is a feminist practice of undermining the Name of the Father. The unfaithful reading strays from the author, the authorized, produces that which does not hold as reproduction, as a representation. Infidelity is not outside the system of marriage, the symbolic, patriarchy, but hollows it out, ruins it from within.  
(Gallop, 48)

Infidelity is a term that so aptly describes Atwood's textual strategies. Playing by the Father's rules, she beats him at his own game. This duplicitous discourse has obvious

affinities with the deconstructionist endeavour, that which works "by means of a necessarily double gesture" (Derrida, *Positions*, 6):

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible, nor effective, nor can they take accurate aims except by inhabiting those structures, inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more, when one does not suspect it.  
(Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24)

Atwood is no dutiful daughter; hers is a strategic seduction. The allusive, poetic quality of even her prose constitutes a linguistic flirtation, an erotic ambiguity that leaves us teetering on the textual edge, trembling on the rhizomatic line. We are enticed, drawn in, solicited:

I will tell the secret to you,  
to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.  
(1974: "Siren Song", *SP*, 195-6)

Of course the encounter need not be a fearful one (but a certain amount of danger certainly spices things up). Reading Atwood's texts offers the blissful possibilities of linguistic *jouissance*. Playing *Murder in the Dark* can be intellectually complex, but it is always enjoyable: "[we] played *Murder in the Dark*, which gave the boys the pleasure of being able to put their hands around the girls' necks and gave the girls the pleasure of screaming" (*MD*, 29). Solicited, we may be shaken up or we may be seduced; ideally we should be both.

Atwood's infidelity is a specifically feminine one; an Eve-like transgression of paternal interdict in favour of her own corporeal pleasures and satisfactions. If the phallic proportions of the Word made flesh institute an economy devoted to that "little pocket signifier" (Cixous, *LM*, 261), then Atwood challenges that decree with a feminine (an/e)nunciation. For her, writing is "a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word" (*SW*, 348). The pleasures of *her* texts are not only intellectual but seductively corporeal. Identifying sexual difference as a difference of pleasure, Cixous suggests that every entry to language finds itself "*Before the Apple*" ("Extreme Fidelity", 15). Eve is the presented with the discourses of God and Apple; the former an invisible word of negation -- the *no* of the Father -- and the latter, the materiality of a flesh-filled offering. Eve chooses the latter (what woman wouldn't?) Biting the apple, she transgresses paternal *and* liminal boundaries: "This story tells us that the genesis of

woman goes through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure, and through a non-fear of the inside" (16). Atwood's *is* this oral pleasure, this negation of fruitless discourse in favour of a fleshly word. Like Eve, her filiations are sensual ones. Contrary to a series of *Thou shalt not's*, Atwood offers the open-ended textuality of endless *Thou shalt's*. As Kristeva says: "women's knowledge is corporal, aspiring to pleasure rather than tribal unity (the forbidden fruit seduces Eve's senses of *sight* and *taste* )" ("About Chinese Women", 140).

Tasting the forbidden fruit, Eve gains new wisdom. Transgressing His Law, her womanly Innocence is shattered, and she sees herself in a new light. (We have only His word for the negativity of this vision. In any case, how can ignorance be bliss? How can the attainment of Knowledge constitute a Fall from Grace unless it is in the Father's interests to keep the feminine in the dark?) For Atwood, ignorance is assuredly not a state of Grace; her exhortations are those of the serpent rather than the prohibitions of an insecure deity. Atwood's imperatives are Cubist in nature, directed towards different ways of seeing. Multiple perspectives. The vision of the third eye rhizomes through her texts and in "Instructions for the Third Eye" (*MD*, 61-2), she posits an alternative means of apprehending the world; implicitly a more inclusive vision. Atwood does not expect us to see all, but she does expect us to embrace different points of view. In discussing the third eye, the speaker undermines the distinctions between *vision* and *a vision*: the former relates to empirical evidence and the (masculine) assumption that sight is objective and dependable; the latter to unverified, and very possibly questionable, speculations. Yet the evidence of the eyes is neither objective nor neutral. Vision is always *a vision* and perspective is usually always only one-point: "You find too that what you see depends partly on what you want to look at and partly on how. As I said, the third eye is only an eye" (61). The truth the third eye reveals is only one truth but it is a significantly non-linguistic, visual register and a "way of seeing" independent of the physical organ. Implicitly, this is another way of coming to an understanding; the urgency of which is signalled by the (ironic) concluding reiteration of "You see". This vision challenges the oculocentrism of a specular economy since it is individual and intuitive rather than masked with objectivity and reliant on "universally apprehended" truths. (The third eye characterises the vision of *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and, especially, *Cat's Eye*.) "Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written" (1981: *SP11*, 79-81), gives the third eye a different emphasis: one of obligation. One cannot simply view selectively and dismiss what is distasteful; one cannot be simply a life tourist. Thus, the speaker responds to an unknown accuser, "why tell me then / there is something wrong with my eyes?" and goes on to interrogate his/her perception: "What is it you see then? / Is it a bad dream, a hallucination? / Is it a vision?" The light of Reason breeds (feminine) monsters. Atwood's *is* the illuminated word of *an other* vision, a way of seeing that Susanna



Moodie (among others) is eventually forced to acknowledge. Whilst her mind "demands lamps" in the face of "a large darkness", a man-made instrument will not proffer the requisite revelation. Significantly refusing to contemplate her reflection in the mirror (of civilisation), Moodie claims that she needs "wolf's eyes to see / the truth" (1970: "Further Arrivals", *SP*, 81-2).

Linguistically, thematically, conceptually, Atwood counters the disempowering identifications of a masculine specular economy with other truths, other visions. Her feminine characters all move from the object status of specularisation to the subject status of speculators: "From a spectacle, the seen, women transformed themselves into seers" (Godard, "Epi(pro)logue", 324). Neither they, nor Atwood, claim the authority of an omniscient vision, but demonstrate the efficacy of multi-faceted (even contradictory) visions. Thus, the discussions that precede and follow this epi(pro)logue<sup>8</sup> do not proffer the stability of a fixed perspective, nor does *this* discussion constitute the introductory or conclusive gesture of authorial command. Rather, it is a strategic affirmation of *my* vision of Atwood, one that is "centered" only on the assertion of a de-centered, de-stabilised, teasingly subversive textual body. A prologue initiates a discussion but is usually always written last and this preface embodies that contradiction. Begin with it. End with it. Do both if you wish (I hope that you do). Don't assume it is the first word, nor the last. Remember, "The rhizome is anti-geneology" (*OTL*, 21). An epilogue concludes -- always a dangerous thing where Atwood is concerned -- but a prologue presents possibilities. This thesis then, is an epi(pro)logue which, like Atwood's texts, offers the possibility of possibilities, not an origin but a feminine beginning. There *is* a *différance*:

The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it's the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but *starting on all sides at once*, that makes feminine writing.  
(Cixous, *CD?*, 53, my emphasis)

The only "authentic ending" is in death -- although, as "This Is a Photograph of Me" demonstrates, even Atwoodian deaths are not conclusive -- but Atwood's textual annunciations are multitudinously life-affirming ("Happy Endings" *MD*, 40). But dismissing the ubiquity of easy conclusions, the speaker/narrator of "Happy Endings" -- perhaps Atwood? -- affirms the pleasure of a different kind of writerly text: "So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun."

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I say "she" out of a habit that is not without some justification. To my knowledge, Atwood has *never* written a poem using the masculine first person. Those who speak in the first person are either explicitly (or implicitly) feminine speakers.
- <sup>2</sup> Deleuze's and Guattari's use of this cartographic metaphor is not of the usual order of dominating quantification. Rather, it suggests the freedom of endless possible routes: "the map is open, connectible in all its dimensions, and capable of being dismantled; it is reversible, and susceptible to constant modification" (26).
- <sup>3</sup> Earl G. Ingersoll's excellent collection of interviews, *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, contains a wealth of examples of this nature. The wit and complexity that mark her fiction are here, abundantly (and admirably) clear.
- <sup>4</sup> As Atwood says in this interview, feminism is part of a much larger struggle for "human dignity" (75). Whilst I am focussing on her feminist agenda, all her texts make it clear that oppression is not an exclusively feminine experience. In any case when it is you against the wall, facing the firing squad, it matters little whether a Miss or a Ms is being executed.
- <sup>5</sup> A conventional reading of *Bodily Harm* would posit the prison cell as the "here" suggested in the novel's opening line. But considering the narrative projection of the novel's conclusion, "here" could be on the plane, or the relative safety of Toronto. Thus, the recontextualisation of the story from the point of a finally revealed Word or Space is still profoundly disconcerted.
- <sup>6</sup> Gallop, in her usual complex and comic style, interrogates the letter of the Father's Law, to discover that the phallus is always already marked by the penis: "centric" derives from the Greek *kentrein* -- to prick.
- <sup>7</sup> Like Irigaray, whose poetic texts also embody a rigorous interrogation of the master narrators, I "*have a fling with the philosophers*" (qtd in Grosz, *JL*, 186). The disruption of the Father's Word is most assuredly not to replace it with the sanctity of the Mother's.
- <sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Barbara Godard for this useful term.

## **SPECULATIONS**

A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.

The facts of this world seen clearly  
are seen through tears;  
why tell me then  
there is something wrong with my eyes?

.....

What is it you see then?  
Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?  
Is it a vision?

"Notes Toward a Poem That Can Never Be Written"  
*Selected Poems*, 81.

That *Bodily Harm*'s succinct epigraph is drawn from a book concerned with vision and the social implications of the viewing I/eye constitutes an appropriate prefatory comment to a novel concerned with the feminine subject position. It is an observation that is both embodied and rejected in the course of the novel. Examining the tradition of nineteenth-century oil painting, Berger exposes the assumption of mastery, objectivity and neutrality associated with the viewing "I". Both he and Atwood interrogate these assumptions and deconstruct the basis on which they are founded. By tracing the European depiction of the nude, Berger demonstrates that the gaze is an essentially masculine prerogative and historically, has been an unquestioned privilege and occupation. Since the tradition of the nude is more accurately described as the tradition of the *female* nude, Berger raises some interesting questions about the construction and definition of femininity reflected in cultural artifacts commissioned, produced, and consumed almost exclusively by men. As the quotation from *Ways of Seeing* suggests, within the specular economy women are passive recipients of masculine attentions. The assumptions about sight, and the preoccupation with viewing as a means of power, that Berger identifies in images of women in art and advertising are not limited to these cultural phenomena, but in fact pervade the whole social system:

In the art form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them, they survey, like men, their own femininity.  
(63)

As the object of the masculine gaze, women are denied subjectivity. Women are the viewed rather than the viewer, the seen rather than the seer, the object *of* the gaze rather than the subject who gazes. In this equation *to see* is to have power, *to be seen* is to be objectified and rendered powerless.

Luce Irigaray makes the same observation and broadens the context of the discussion: "Woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight and her entrance into a dominant scopic economy signifies, once again, her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object" (SØ, 101). Visibility is given predominance over tactility. Sight is the most important sense in *this* economy and entry to it is governed by specular identification. It is the touchstone of the symbolic order and its dominance -- both

theoretically and pragmatically -- is at the expense of other senses: "A voyeur's theory, of course" (Cixous, Ss, 95). Even the metaphors by which this economy is explained are specular ones: the mirror stage, Oedipal drama and associated primal scene fundamental to the constitution of the subject, the entry into language, sexual difference and dominance, are all governed or initiated by visual identifications. The construction of the feminine is therefore based on an ontology in which sight plays a decisive role. Vision is the sole criteria of judgement: women are viewed and found wanting. The symbolic order is one that constructs and defines women according to a masculine normative standard; a construction based on a visual perception of deficiency. Women are marginalised by a scopic economy in which we have no relation to the phallic equivalent except our lack of it.<sup>1</sup> To enter this order is to accept the state of castration as a feminine state, with all its accompanying connotations of negativity and otherness. Castrated, the feminine is relegated to the negative mirror image of masculine presence. Lacking a phallic equivalent women are denied a subject position based upon it: "Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist" (Ss, 92). In an order in which the phallus is the ultimate signifier, the organ of sight colludes with the organ of power, in a strategic alliance that naturalises masculine dominance. Masculine logic is specular logic as the seeing eye becomes inseparable from the knowing "I", the eye from *eidos*. Sight is equated with knowledge; seeing is believing. The gaze, therefore, operates according to the same binary oppositions that govern and characterise Western thought; oppositions that both serve and construct the masculine and accord it privilege over the secondary term designated as feminine. Metaphorically, the viewer is always masculine and the viewed is always feminine. What is seen is necessarily less important than he who sees. The gaze asserts priority of subject over object, masculine over feminine, the specular consumer over the consumed, "here" over "there".

There is, however, a paradoxical assumption inherent in the epistemology of the seeing I/eye. The assumed unity and cohesion of the Cartesian "knowing subject" is accompanied by the assumed objectivity of the viewing subject. An unbiased vision requires distance from the object viewed and this physical separation becomes connected, in the specular economy, with critical distance and detachment: the world is not constructed by the subject but rather, is completely external to it. The viewing subject is therefore wholly unaffected/unmediated by it. (Atwood summarily rejects the experiential exemption of this kind of vision. In "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" [1968: *SP*, 60-3], she suggests the destructive effect of such speculations: the pioneer's eyes are "made ragged by his / effort, the tension / between subject and object".) Consequently, specular knowledge and the eye/I gain all the associations of rationality and objectivity that have governed Western thought since the Enlightenment. Thus, the masculine gaze becomes

the instrument of Truth, the masculine epistemology becomes the *only* epistemology, and "objectivity!" becomes the catch-cry, conferring power from which all desire is erased.

It is the construction of the feminine that has so obviously borne the markings and the consequences of the masculine preoccupation with "objective" self-promotion. Ironically, the masculine gaze is always already marked by the desire it attempts to mask. Proclaiming its own lack of desire (in the interests of neutrality), the masculine economy objectifies women -- thereby denying the possibility of feminine desire -- and then inscribes *her* body with *his* desire. In perhaps the ultimate displacement of this economy's unconscious the construction of the feminine is both a vehicle for, and a sign of, a repressed desire. As Berger points out:

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'Vanity', thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.  
(51)

Thus, his self-centered speculations fulfil a dual purpose: "The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight" (Berger, 51).

What Berger identifies on a pictorial level is only symptomatic of a more general tendency pertaining to images of women. The implications are two-fold: the first is that the masculine gaze is fundamentally narcissistic -- the male spectator looks outward to see himself. As a negative mirror image, as an absence and a lack, the viewed woman assures *his* presence and *his* possession. As Irigaray says, if women are thought to envy men their penises, then men are reassured of that possession:

For the "penis-envy" alleged against woman is -- let us repeat -- a remedy for man's fear of losing one. If she envies it, then he must have it. If she envies what he has, then it must be valuable. The only thing valuable enough to be envied? The very standard of all value. Woman's fetishization of the male organ must indeed be an indispensable support of its price on the sexual market.  
(*Spec*, 53)

The second implication is that of the message to women to collude in objectification; in the offering up of a consumable image. Both have little to do with specifically feminine desires and everything to do with masculine ones. Women are relegated to the status of beautiful object; feminine agency is out of the question. Proffering a reflection of his subjectivity, *her* pleasure, *her* desire, *her* subjectivity is endlessly deferred:

Thus a woman does not become the Other but *his* Other, his Unconscious, his repressed, and she gets caught in the endless and enduring circle of *his* representation. Enmeshed in man's self-representation, woman exists only insofar as she endlessly reflects back to him the image of his manly reality. Inscribed in his identity, designated by a minus sign which emphasises her deficient being --



-phallus, -power, -unity -- woman is reduced to being like the plane surface of a plane mirror. . . . She has become a mere reproduction, a mere reflection.  
(Féral, "The Powers of Difference", 89)

The implications for women of the patriarchal gaze are some of the major preoccupations in Atwood's work. Indeed, vision -- different ways of seeing -- forms a rhizomatic thread weaving in and out of her texts to various contextual effect. Many of her works expose the specular logic with which women are constructed in the masculine economy. "Tricks With Mirrors" quite literally describes the position of women as mere reflection since the woman in the poem is granted existence only within the narcissistic gaze of her lover (1974: *SP*, 183-6). As a mirror she is the perfect lover since in contemplating her, her lover is actually contemplating himself. The poem, however, explores the implications for women of two-dimensionality and the mirror quickly becomes associated with death. She is a "dead blue oblong eye", "a surface of ice". To achieve the desired projection of a body "flawless but reversed" demands constricting restraint and the repression of emotion. It also involves withheld breath. Denied three-dimensional reality -- subjectivity in her own right -- she is implicitly denied life. Caught within the frame of *his* representation she is paralysed by his gaze. Encouraged to think about the nails with which mirrors are *hung* -- "pay attention to the nail / marks in the wood" -- connotations of crucifixion and frantic attempts to escape are evoked. In fact the poem abounds with these violent undercurrents. In images redolent of (sexual) violation she is carried up the stairs and thrown onto a bed; hers is a life "*flattened* against a wall" as the mirror becomes a door behind which she is imprisoned by a Bluebeard-like partner (my emphasis).

But there is more to this mirror than meets the eye. Mirrors only reflect what is projected into them. To see himself, her lover must deny her existence and specificity: he must symbolically kill her. Accordingly, the image of himself that she proffers is a frozen image of death. In her he is "preserved", animation is "suspended"; contemplating her, he contemplates himself but the image she returns is one in which his eyes are *closed*. The safety he assumes in her passive gift of reflection is erroneous. The gift she proffers is implicitly an image of his own death. He may make of her a mirror but "mirrors are crafty". Within the confines of his gaze she is still elusive. As the speaker so succinctly points out, one cannot penetrate a two-dimensional image: "fall into me, / it will be your own / mouth you hit, firm and glassy". He may be able to see her, but he cannot *touch* her. If woman's only function is to reflect masculine presence, then the mirror metaphor is associatively teased out to form a strategy of subversion (the metaphor is accepted and then subverted. Irigaray's is exactly the same infidelity. It's no accident that her book is called *Speculum of the Other Woman*). Acquiescing to his implicit discomfort with the direction her metaphors are taking, she meekly offers an alternative reflecting surface to her narcissistic lover: "Perhaps I am not a mirror. / Perhaps I am a

pool. / Think about pools." Given the associations of death linked with her function as mirror, the pool provides even more interesting metaphorical opportunities for specular suicide.

As a mirror, the speaker in "Tricks With Mirrors" is both consumed image and consumer object: an object/medium of exchange. As she says: "It's no coincidence / this is a used / furniture warehouse."<sup>2</sup> "Iconography" (MD, 52), also points to the specular logic with which women are constructed, as the body becomes an image and an object to be manipulated according to the needs of masculine desire. Like furniture or flowers, she is arranged for his specular consumption. Again, her primary function is that of a sight. Objectified, relegated to passivity, she becomes the product of his artistic labours. She provides the raw material, the blank space, the surface from which and on which his desired image is fashioned. And, like the malleable surface of putty, her body is moulded and remoulded to accommodate the changing dictates of masculine fashions of desire: "The most important thing is making her. Over, from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants." Like the mirror, her body becomes a flat surface upon which his desire is painted/stamped: "All you see is the skin, that smile of hers, flat but indelible, like a *tattoo*" (my emphasis). The prose poem's title provides a similar ironic mask to the true content. Whilst the term may be drawn from the privileged realms of art historical discourse it could be replaced by a more accurate, but less euphemistic, term: *pornography*. This defining vision is not confined to the high arts but in fact pervades the whole spectrum of cultural production:

What men see, therefore, when they look at pornography (or indeed any public image of women) are not women, but women made over into *artifacts*. They gaze at a man-made object, not a woman; at a body "eviscerated of its substance and history" and not at the living flesh: abstract, impeccable, clothed with marks and thus invulnerable, "made up" (*faict* and *fainct*) in the profound sense of the expression; cut off from external determinations and the internal reality of its desire, yet offered up in the same turn as idol . . .

(Baudrillard, qtd in Finn, 84)

The reverence accorded the body as image/idol, however, masks the fact that she exists only as *his* symbolic representation. Whether revered or reviled, as icon she is above all silent: "It can never be known whether she likes it or not. By this time she doesn't know herself . . . Hard to tell, and she never will, she can't." Caught within the circle of his desire she loses touch with her own: "Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, if only he will 'take' her as the 'object' of his pleasure, she will not say what she wants. Moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants" (Irigaray, SØ, 100).

"Iconography" explores the dangers that this objectification presents. Encouraged to think of ourselves as sights -- "Watch yourself. That's what the mirrors are for." --

women are encouraged to participate in our own marginalisation.<sup>3</sup> The greatest victory that the masculine economy can achieve is of course to persuade its victims to collude in their own victimisation; to make women view themselves as men view them. Conversion is the *pièce de résistance*. Thus, the apparent free association of mirror and horror with which the piece concludes is not accidental. The "gift" that women are presented with is not a dream come true but a living nightmare.

That this order offers either complicity or death is demonstrated quite literally by the many layered ironies of "Marrying the Hangman" (1978: *SPH*, 21-3). Here, the unnamed woman is sentenced to death for stealing clothes. The Law that condemns her is the same Law that decrees: "Woman, make thyself a beautiful object." Ironically, her punishment is to live without the mirrors with which this economy measures her value, and with which she measures herself:

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

To regain "freedom" she must persuade him to assume the "impersonal mask of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth" and then marry her erstwhile executioner. Her salvation is assured only by embracing the symbolic representation of the Law and the vision that has imprisoned her. Yet the mirror she is offered is the violating voice of phallocratism -- "foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife" -- and her freedom merely another form of confinement: "What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another?" By juxtaposing the horror stories of a contemporary context with historical events, Atwood shows that marrying the hangman is not an isolated historical anomaly, but rather a metaphor for the alternatives offered women by an order governed by specular judgements: "This is not fantasy, it is history, there is more than one hangman and because of this some of them are unemployed."

Given the masculine attachment to sight and the possessive power it confers, it is hardly surprising that in Atwood's texts vision and violence are intimately connected. For many of her characters, to be seen is to be metaphorically violated; descriptions of scrutiny are usually accompanied by images (and/or feelings) of capture, entrapment and murder.<sup>4</sup> Like the woman "flattened against the wall" in "Tricks with Mirrors", the speaker in "The Circle Game" is crucified by her lover's debilitating mental and visual cartography:

So now you trace me  
like a country's boundary  
or a strange new wrinkle in  
your own wellknown skin  
and I am fixed, stuck  
down on the outspread map  
of this room, of your mind's continent

.....  
 transfixed  
 by your eyes'  
 cold blue thumbtacks  
 (1966: *SP*, 14-24)

Masculine cartography has excruciating consequences. A refugee from the war in his own country, Josef Hrbic in *Cat's Eye* pioneers his way into the "untouched" country that is Elaine Risley's body: "This is the way he wants me, he says. When he says these things he runs his hands over my skin as if he's erasing me, rubbing me smooth" (298). Although Josef teaches life-drawing, film is a medium he wants to pursue: a mechanistic way of seeing (305). Telling Elaine she is "unfinished", he intends to complete her artistic and sexual education, but as Elaine inwardly retorts: "He doesn't know that *finished* means over and done with" (273). Captivated by his charms she fails to recognise the colonisation that his gaze implies: "I have no country," says Josef mournfully . . . "You are my country now" (299).<sup>5</sup>

The invalidating consequences of the patriarchal gaze (with its associations of capture and consumption) are most evident in *The Edible Woman*. In a comprehensive discussion of the novel, Pamela S. Bromberg has also noted Marian MacAlpin's experience as an object of masculine specul(ar)isation. Marian's engagement to Peter marks the transition from subject consumer to object consumed as she becomes entrapped by his conventional expectations of "regulation" femininity. Once Marian's independence has been exchanged for the promised *bonds* of matrimony, Peter starts making her over into the desired image -- the beautiful accessory object -- fit reflection of his success. This objectification prompts Marian's increasing alienated sense of herself as a surface/sight, an alienation that is textually signalled by the movement from first- to third-person narration. Thus, for the engagement party at which she will be displayed to Peter's friends, Marian makes of herself a visual *hors d'oeuvre* for the gourmands to devour -- the edible woman that gives the novel its title. The imagery with which the procedure is described, however, raises some sinister connotations. In the salon she joins "the assembly line" of women, to have her head treated "like a cake; something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (209; 208). Anaesthetised, strapped to her chair, she undergoes "the operation" and is "fascinated by the draped figure *prisoned* in the filigreed gold oval of the mirror" (my emphasis, 209). Donning the unfamiliar red dress and literally finished off by Ainsley's cosmetic applications the mirror returns to her the image of a stranger: "Marian stared into the egyptian-lidded and outlined and thickly-fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before" (222). Predictably, Peter is aroused by this visual merchandise. As the marriage approaches, her self is slowly but progressively erased to be replaced by the acquisitive stamp of Peter's desire. This imprisoning objectification is to be completed by the camera that will capture her assumed image and seal her doom. In Peter's hands, the camera assumes all the violent and murderous

connotations of a gun: "he raised the camera and aimed it at her; his mouth opened in a snarl of teeth" (244).<sup>6</sup> Marian's previous discomfort finally crystallises into the recognition that his gaze is an immobilising one: "She would not let him catch her this time. Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (245). Fleeing the party to avoid this specular capture -- a movement that initiates her rejection of this visual categorisation and of the marriage -- Marian realises that she has been about to marry the hangman: "That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (246).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the patriarchal gaze is often symbolised in Atwood's texts by mechanistic (and therefore dangerously unnatural) instruments of vision and an accompanying privileging of (visual) sense over sensibility. The narrator in *Surfacing* displays an intuitive distrust of specular seizure -- "I used to hate standing still, waiting for the click" (69) -- and the photo album bears testimony to her attempts to evade the camera's freezing cold scrutiny: "I was the one smudged with movement or turning the other way" (108).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the movie camera that the men wield with such pride and self-satisfaction is merely an instrument of subjugation and/or menace. The Random Samples they record are not metaphorically random at all, but carefully framed indications of the effects of masculine surveillance. Focussed upon themselves the camera freezes their dominance into permanence; focussed outwards it records only images of death: the dead moose, the disembowelled fish, the crucified heron. Turned upon women, the implications are just as threatening: "Joe swivelled the camera and trained it on them like a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture and pressed the button, lever, sinister whirr" (135-6). The insidious way in which David coerces Anna into a striptease performance, and the frightening detachment with which he commits her degradation to film, presents a dramatic example of the appropriation of her body to his desire and her entrapment within the destructive circle of his vision. This episode is merely the end-product of an objectification in which she colludes. Assuming the daily mask of cosmetic artificiality, Anna offers herself up as an artifact, as surface, as imitation of required femininity. It is a ritual that systematically cements her submission to a dehumanising vision. As the narrator comments: "The machine is gradual, it takes a little of you at a time, it leaves the shell" (165). The mechanistic detachment with which she is scrutinised promotes only an imprisoning artificiality:

... a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, *the original nowhere*, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, *captive princess in someone's head*. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she

copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso *while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room*, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all. She is not bored, she has no other interests.  
(165, my emphasis)

In an effort to free Anna from this celluloid prison, and in a defiant rejection of the specularisation they epitomize, the narrator finally dumps the rolls of film into the lake. Like her earlier descent to the depths the action initiates release from a form of living death as she contemplates "hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved" escaping (167).<sup>9</sup>

As the narrator's experience in *Surfacing* shows, submission to this economy (in whatever capacity) promotes sensory paralysis: a division between a life that is seen and one that is felt. This separation is exemplified by the recurring image of a head/body split:

I didn't feel awful; I realized that I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or *without a sense of touch*; but if that was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence. At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head, since then everything had been glancing off me, *it was like being in a vase . . .*  
(105-6, my emphasis)

Frozen in the glassed-in control cubicle of her mind she becomes divorced from her body; from an ability to touch and therefore, to feel. She has become "detached, terminal" (108). Appropriately enough, her detachment links her with David whose scopopic investment promotes such ruthless insensitivity. David's position, however, is one of choice; the narrator's position is neither acceptable nor chosen, but rather, imposed. It is only when she rejects this life in the head and all it stands for -- logic, reason, impersonal observation, death -- that her paralysis begin to abate: "feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (146).

That many of Atwood's female characters reject the impersonality of observation for the immediacy of tactile sensation illustrates Irigaray's assertion that woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight. It is this metaphor of a sexuality, indeed a whole system, that is given over to touch that is textually played out in *Bodily Harm*, most notably in the symbolic imagery of hands that peppers the narrative. Marginalised by/within a specular economy Rennie is literally and symbolically "out of touch". In the flashbacks that puncture the text, Rennie's sensibility, or rather lack of it, is traced. Although she would rather forget her upbringing, the repeated references to Griswold indicate a formative influence. Here, under strict (moral) surveillance Rennie learns three things: "how to be quiet, what not to say, and *how to look at things without touching them*" (54, my emphasis). Continually under scrutiny, Rennie learns not to do anything to attract attention. While she escapes from Griswold in physical terms, she carries its

myopic mentality with her. Thus, Rennie becomes a reporter on lifestyles, on appearances, on surfaces. As a "roving eye" she can see without being seen, contemplate without becoming involved: "she saw herself as off to the side. She preferred it there" (26). Whilst she herself remains inviolate, those she views desperately proffer their vulnerability: "arms flung wide to the sides, hands open to show that there were no concealed weapons, head thrown back, throat bared to the knife; an offering, an exposure" (26). Exposure is the one thing she seeks most to avoid, assuming neutrality, and therefore safety, lies in invisibility: "This is the effect she aims for, neutrality, she needs it for her work, as she used to tell Jake. Invisibility" (15). It is surely appropriate therefore, that Rennie works for a men's magazine called *Visor*: it is a word that alludes "both to a mask and to an object that frames and thereby limits vision" and alludes also to the power of seeing without being *seen* to see (Rubenstein, 128). The armour of this assumed way of seeing allows Rennie to separate here from there, subject from object, inner from outer; distinctions that, in the interests of her own detachment, she is at pains to maintain. Not surprisingly, therefore, the sight of Lora's bitten hands makes her inwardly flinch: "She wouldn't want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn't like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that" (86). Assuming the mask of masculine vision, Rennie adopts the impersonal, objectifying subject position and stance that it requires: thus, upon receiving news of her breast cancer her response reveals an habitual depersonalised surface orientation: "she was still thinking in the ways she was used to. For instance she could do a piece on it. 'Cancer, The Coming Thing.' *Homemakers* might take it, or *Chatelaine*. How about 'The Cutoff Point'?" (27).

Subscribing to a scopic economy Rennie loses the corporeal sense; her own body becomes something from which she is alienated: an "it", a vessel, a machine. Sex and death become inextricably linked as her body becomes anaesthetised, "a barrier of deadened flesh" (21). Making love is, like the operation, "a procedure" she waits passively to undergo "as if she were in a dentist's office, waiting for something to be done to her" (21). Rennie views both the situation and her body with dispassion: "watching him from her head, which was up there on the pillow at the other end of her body" (199).<sup>10</sup> She now regards intimate toiletries as mere "pieces of cleaning and sterilizing equipment people use on their bodies" (48). Her symbolic dream reveals her subconscious severance from a body that is and is not her own; an object on which others (men) visually or physically operate:

She can see everything, clear and sharp, *under glass*, her body is down there on the table, covered in green cloth, there are figures around her, *in masks*, they're in the middle of a performance, *a procedure*, an invasion, but it's not skin deep, it's the heart they're after, in there somewhere, squeezing away, a fist opening and closing around a ball

of blood. Possibly her life is being saved, but who can tell what they're doing, she doesn't trust them, she wants to regain her body but she can't get down.  
(172, my emphasis)

Rennie's is the distanced, limited vision of the masked magazine for which she works. But the consequences of this way of seeing are depersonalising and distorting. Submitting to this scopic *procedure* is thus harmful in more ways than one.

In some ways Rennie's cancer is merely symptomatic of the wasting effects of the order of the gaze, an order in which she is implicated. Thus, Rennie is both victim and her own victimiser since the disease is within herself: the mark of Cain. There is an ironic truth in Rennie's observation that Griswold would see her cancer as something she brought upon herself: "The body sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it" (82). Rennie cannot understand why her body has betrayed her, but even her incomprehension is expressed in the language of objectification: "She'd given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden *it* junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed *it* a normal amount of sexual release. She'd trusted *it*. Why then had *it* turned against her?" (82, my emphasis) This bodily invasion is accompanied by an invasion of her space in the form of the man with the rope: the faceless stranger. His presence provokes a Griswoldian sense of participation in her own exposure: "she had been seen, too intimately, her face blurred and distorted, damaged, owned in some way she couldn't define" (40). To be the spectator is acceptable; to be made a spectacle *of* is something quite different. Continuing to feel herself under scrutiny, Rennie begins "to see herself from the outside, as if she was a moving target in someone else's binoculars" (40). Rennie surveys herself in the manner in which she is surveyed. This collaboration is signalled by her later dream of the faceless stranger. Significantly, Rennie and he are linked by an ocular resemblance: "he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own" (287). This is not to imply that Rennie is wholly responsible for her situation -- indeed it is quite the opposite -- but merely to indicate the ambiguity of the subject position offered her. Although she may adopt the armour of surveillance her femininity makes her the object of that specularisation. Her disassociation from her body does not commence with the discovery of her breast cancer, but is rather the condensed result of her investment in a scopic economy. It is an investment instigated by her non-tactile childhood; her treatment at paternal hands. Rennie's grandfather is another patriarchal, doctorly figure, but one whose operations are disturbingly brutal (55). Worshipping her husband (56), Rennie's grandmother disseminates his religion. One of the first things Rennie can remember is being shut in a cellar by her grandmother, in punishment for real or imagined wrongdoing. *Even to make a noise* resulted in this imprisoning treatment (53). Considering Rennie's later incarceration in the underground cell on St Antoine the symbolism is obvious. But Rennie refuses to see -- she refuses to make these connections. For her,



Griswold is a "subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; *nothing you'd want to go into*" (my emphasis, 18). Rennie's is the distance fostered in her childhood, an ingrained lesson in how *not* to touch. The object viewed must never transgress the boundaries of the lens, hence her refusal as a child to take her grandmother's "leper['s]" hands (297). The process of objectification is one from which she is not exempt.

It is this very investment, however, that leads Rennie to believe that she *is* exempt. Her divorce from her body is a fit complement to her divorce from involvement. Rennie prefers to stand on the sidelines, to be a passive voyeur rather than an active participant, since "massive involvement [has] never been [her] thing" (34). When she is asked to write an article for *Visor* giving "the woman's angle" on pornography as an art form, she is unconcerned. Dutifully, she interviews an artist whose three-dimensional images are derived from pornographic material. Since the medium is of course the message, she is advised to view the raw material: seized pornographic objects. The policeman who escorts Rennie through the exhibition displays his wares with an almost eager showmanship. Rennie is qualmless, watching with detachment until "the grand finale". She may affect the reserve of the masculine gaze, but it is something that she cannot swallow hook, line and sinker. Her involuntary reaction to this abhorrent representation of degradation is a forceful bodily statement and the ultimate symbol of rejection: she vomits. This is the real "woman's angle" her editor seeks but is unlikely to embrace. Although Rennie is shaken by the experience, she ignores her body's warning signals and returns to the safety of documenting superficial appearances because "surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths" (211). Significantly, this episode is textually sandwiched between descriptions of Jake's sexual fantasies and temporally located in relation to the operation that disfigures her. Whilst Rennie intuitively recognises the similarity, the connection between the raw material she views and her own situation is one she refuses to make. She does not allow the episodes of her life to *touch upon* each other. What Rennie refuses to recognise is that this commitment to blinkered vision produces the objectification that her body so violently rejects. As Jones notes: "The men's magazine that commissions Rennie to write about St Antoine is called *Visor*. When men obscure their individuality behind a mask of anonymous authority and power, women are stripped of their identity and reduced to so much raw material" ("Waiting For the Rescue", 96).

Arriving at St Antoine, Rennie relishes the safety afforded by the visor of anonymity. She is attracted to Paul because she recognises in him a "deliberate neutrality" so like her own (46). His indifference complements her own attitude of disassociation and, like David and the narrator in *Surfacing*, he is identified as a person in whom something is missing (214). Rennie's camera is echoed by Paul's telescope which

"confers furtive power, the power to watch without being watched" (218). The limits of the visual frame, however, encourage a selective focus. Until her incarceration, Rennie's camera goes everywhere with her, symbolising her assumed vision and signalling the protective "diplomatic immunity" she believes it accords her: she is a tourist, and therefore exempt. She, like the rest of the tourists, is "a spectator, a voyeur" (125), implicated in a certain surface orientated way of seeing: "like her they can look all they want to, they are under no obligation to see, they can take pictures of anything they wish" (185). Rennie's position is ironically presented in the language of consumerism. Just as she is in no way obliged to see depths, so she is in no way obliged to remain with Paul since "she's a tourist, she can keep her options open. She can always go somewhere else" (227). Her own life becomes a film or programme -- a spectacle -- from which she is divorced. Discovering the machine gun, Rennie thinks she is in "an exceptionally tacky movie" (159); caught in the revolution she wants somebody to "change the channel" (259); imprisoned "she longs for late-night television, she's had enough reality for the time being. Popcorn is what she needs" (269). Rennie's relationship with Paul reunites her with her body, but does not exorcise her scopophilic attachment. He is "the connection" but he is not the answer, since he himself is not always present in his own body (222), and he assures, indeed he encourages, Rennie's lack of involvement.<sup>11</sup>

As the flashbacks show, however, Rennie is not exempt from anything. The bodily harm that Rennie sustains is merely indicative of her "treatment" at masculine hands. Her relationship with Jake is one in which she is relegated to being the object of both his specular and physical attentions, with all the typically layered connotations of violation, rape and death. She is the blank page on which he doodles (105). Appropriately enough, Jake is an artist of surfaces -- a packager of consumer products. When he moves into Rennie's apartment he brings his work home; arranging and manipulating her for his own specular ingestion. The prints that he hangs on the wall are clear indications of his attitude toward women. The print of the featureless, supine woman on the sofa attended by the bull is self-explanatory; in the context of Rennie's later operation, *Enigma* raises more interesting connotations. The material in which the woman is bound suggests both the bandages of medicine and those of mummification: healing and death. The bodily parts exposed are those of visual (sexual) differentiation. Her trussed body echoes Jake's sexual fantasies: "he liked to pin [Rennie's] hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move. He liked that, he liked to think of sex as something he could win at" (207). Whilst she is only vaguely disconcerted by these images their significance is clearly obvious to other men: the cops who arrive to "protect" her. Jake masks his misogyny beneath the guise of "healthy" fantasy, mere games and "understood" jokes, and the "apolitical" status of art. His art, however, is little different to that of the artist Rennie interviews who uses life-size mannequins to create utilitarian

objects of furniture: "One of the chairs was a woman on her knees, her back arched, her wrists tied to her thighs. The ropes and arms were the arms of the chair, her bum was the seat" (208). Although sculptural, these beautiful objects are created for "contemplation" (208). Therefore it is not surprising that the women are scantily and provocatively clad, whilst the only male model is fully clothed.<sup>12</sup> What the pornographic artist "makes . . . visible" is what "society deals out" (208). *His* art is merely a fictive example of the art that "inspired" John Berger's epigraphical observation: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her." Bound and frozen in attitudes of subjugation, these women are the reality evoked by Jake's "playful" assertion that all women should be locked in cages. (The connection between pornography and power resurfaces when Lora points out the *rats* that infest their prison-cellar: "Rennie decides to concentrate on something else. She closes her eyes: she knows there are some things she must avoid thinking about. Her own lack of power, for instance, what could be done to her" [272-3].) This objectification, and Jake's willing participation in it, is merely a quotidian extension of a general pornographic principle. Although Jake may claim to know the difference between a game and the real thing -- "a desire and a need" -- his attitude, like the pornographer's art, is merely a variation on a theme of sex, power and oppression.

Initially, Rennie is unthreatened by Jake's interest in making her over the way he wants her. By a web of metaphor and implication, however, Jake's gaze becomes increasingly associated with bodily harm: "You're so closed, Jake said once. I like that. I want to be the one you open up for. But she could never remember afterwards what he had actually said. Perhaps he'd said, I want to be the one who opens you up" (106). The invasion of Rennie's body by the mutilating surgeon's knife is equated with the exposure to, and bodily invasion by, the masculine gaze. She is, quite literally, scarred by her connection with a scopic economy which bestows on her "the *kiss* of death". The offer of mutilation or death -- "Nobody's forcing you, it's your own decision" (23) -- represents the only alternative presented to the feminine by the symbolic order. To live/survive Rennie must accept the treatment that is meted out: "*Doctored* they say of drinks that have been tampered with, of cats that have been castrated" (101, my emphasis). The scar she bears is the symbolic representation of her place within the dominant economy: feminine, castrated, and therefore negative and marginal. Cixous defines this place as one "reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once. . . )" (LM, 250). And indeed, Rennie's confession is both encouraged and expected after her apartment is broken into. The questions that the police ask of her carry more than a hint of moral condemnation: Rennie is suspected of

encouraging this voyeur and potential sex-killer. That this attitude is neither isolated nor unique is illustrated by the forties detective story that she reads. Expressing the appropriate moral outrage at the crime (even though the murdered female victim provoked her attack), the private eyes indulge in a rather different form of speculation: "[They] describe each detail of the body fully, lushly, as if running their tongues over it; all that flesh, totally helpless because totally dead" (246). Increasingly, the masculine gaze is equated not only with violence but also with death. When Rennie interrupts negotiations between Paul and Marsdon over the all-important weapons, her captor's glance is one of pure malevolence: "His movements are slow enough, outwardly calm, but he's excited, his eyes gleam in the moonlight. Fragmentation, dismemberment, this is what he sees when he looks at her" (258). In the final connection between art and life, a game and reality, Lora is viciously beaten by the guard who offers her the same "doctorly" comfort that Rennie underwent: 'Morton puts his hand on her arm, soothingly, like a doctor almost. "You go back in," he says, "I doin' the best I can for you. You lucky you alive"' (292). Rennie watches in horror as the image that used to grace her apartment wall becomes a stark and violent reality. There is nothing enigmatic about *this* image. Pinioning her arms the guards ruthlessly beat every exposed point of vulnerability. Bodily harm takes many forms.

The horrific spectacle is one that Rennie cannot avoid watching. The visor of her selective vision has been removed. Throughout the narrative Rennie has been imprisoned by a specular logic; ironically, it is only when she is physically imprisoned that she learns to see. Finally, she makes the connection between subject and object and her own lack of exemption from an economy that oppresses her:

She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything.  
(290)

As long as Rennie continues to be an uninvolved spectator, a voyeur, a tourist, she cannot touch. Her loss of sensibility is signalled by the dreams of her own elusive hands. It is only when she overcomes her own self-imposed barriers against touch that she becomes whole. Her previous reluctance towards Lora's ravaged hands is ignored in a desperate attempt to connect. Whilst the fist of masculine vision brings death and dismemberment, the hand of feminine tactility is a lifeline. Attempting to draw Lora back from the brink, she draws herself back into sensibility. Abandoning the detachment of mechanistic vision she is reunited with her body and with involvement. As her name suggests, Renata has been symbolically saved/reborn.

Rennie generally assumes that she is off the hook, an assumption that is systematically negated in the course of the novel. Atwood does not present an easy out *for anyone*, and as readers, we are certainly not allowed to take the soft option. Rennie's victimisation is a specifically feminine one, but it is only one of many forms of the Same oppression. Rennie certainly sexually entertains a rat, but hers is at least in human form.<sup>13</sup> Jake's disparaging view of women as either "a head with a cunt attached or a cunt with a head attached" (235) is vividly evoked in "the grand finale" of the pornographic exhibition. But here, the fragmented body that entertains the real rodent is that of a black woman. Similarly, the *Enigma* that foreshadows Lora's treatment is the captive image of "a brown skinned woman" (105). (And ironically enough, it is a picture created by a feminine artist: Heather Cooper.) Colour is also a specular categorisation, a sight that does not necessarily encompass a solely feminine constituency. The viewing lens may not focus exclusively on the female Other. As viewer, as spectator, Rennie avoids the danger of self-exposure. But on two significant occasions, Rennie is exposed by a masculine vision: that of the deaf and dumb man. His gaze, however, is not that of the subject-object dialectic but a silent, visual request for involvement (and significantly, it is he who formerly wanted to connect with Rennie by offering her his hand). His gaze is not debilitating, but "an appeal, a plea for help" (146); it is a visual communication -- victim to victim. Indeed, the deaf and dumb man is perhaps the greater victim, since Rennie at least has a voice, even if she has not yet used it. Rennie's attachment to a comfortable vision is, however, immediately disturbed: "As soon as you take a picture of something it's a picture. Picturesque. This isn't" (146). Later, his gaze is an exposure that initiates Rennie's realisation of the impossibility of exemption; Rennie "doesn't want to see" but "she has to see" (293). Sight is a risky business, but seeing is a risk we all must take. For Atwood, ways of seeing are certainly not all of the order of the Same. Specul(aris)ations are dangerous and disempowering, but *speculations* can be subversively productive. Metaphoric invisibility offers only symbolic erasure; to see and be seen is, in Atwood's texts, a (feminist) imperative.

## NOTES

- 1 The penis is of course not the phallus; the latter being as unattainable for men as it is for women. Whilst Lacan is at pains to distance the real penis from the imaginary phallus, feminists have quite rightly pointed out that in the phallogocentric economy the two are equated.
- 2 The poem is ungendered but given the suggestive possibilities of falling into mirrors, the speaker is implicitly a feminine one.
- 3 It is significant that in the final paragraph the narration shifts from the impersonal "she" to the personal "we".
- 4 This equation is given mythic resonance in the poem "Orpheus (1)" (1984: *SP II*, 131-2) where his desire to repossess his love is foiled by the destructive nature of his gaze.
- 5 Elaine also fails to recognise the symbolism of his slash dreams, feeling only a twinge of jealousy that she is not one of his (unconscious) subjects. Considering the nature of his dream visions, this desire is a frighteningly naive one.
- 6 The connection between these two weapons is established early in the novel with Peter's story of his hunting trip in which a rabbit is disembowelled. Peter and his best friend "luckily" get "good shots of the whole mess" (69). And his best friend's name? Trigger.
- 7 The autoeroticism that Irigaray identifies in the economy of the Same springs to mind here, and gives the metaphor an added comic/ironic flavour: "*Hey honey, is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?*"
- 8 It is significant that the later focussed images reflect regulation femininity: "I was civilized at last, the finished product" (108).
- 9 Commitment to this way of seeing has dangerous consequences for both seen and seer. The father's adherence to logical, empirical vision is the very thing that implicitly aids his demise: he is dredged up from the depths still wearing the camera that had weighed him down.
- 10 Rubenstein notes that this is an unconscious adoption of the woman's position in the print that "graces" their bedroom wall (123). I see this not so much as a physical emulation but a textual echo since it is the *description* that is similar, not the position. It is not a minor quibble. Since the narrative presumably originates from Rennie, it is perhaps a more important indicator of her subconscious submission to this incapacitating vision. In this case, it is *Atwood's* irony.
- 11 Jones discusses the religious connections of the islands' names, but another interpretation is a corporeal one: Rennie's incarceration occurs on St Antoine but her body is rediscovered on St Agathe. Significantly, it is also here that miraculous feminine cures are effected (Elva's magical hands) and disorder and revolution begins.
- 12 The fact of his dildo-encrusted head is also not coincidental. They stick out like the "rays of a halo" (208).
- 13 The first description of Jake focusses on his teeth: "flawless except for the long canines" (15).

## **PRICKING THE PHALLUS**

. . . . Oh why did God,  
Creator wise, that peopled highest heaven  
With spirits masculine, create at last  
This novelty on earth, this fair defect  
Of Nature, and not fill the world at once  
With men as angels without feminine,  
Or find some other way to generate  
Mankind? . . . .

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk X, 888-95.



"There's only two kinds of guys, *a prick* and *not a prick*."

*Bodily Harm*, 103.

The sentiments expressed by Milton's Adam are not confined to this particular master narrative but represent a fair indication of an attitudinal tendency underpinning Western thought and discourse. Adam's *view*. With Adam's plaintive cry, Milton reinscribes the conceptual polarity that has governed socio-cultural relations from the first: the self-promotion of the masculine One at the expense of the feminine Other. The order of the Same. Thus, Adam is associated with the angels and God on high, whilst Eve is depicted as the weak link in the chain; an unfortunate addition to an already unitary Mankind; a "fair defect": seductively enticing yet fatally flawed. It is the example *par excellence* of the binary logic that pervades the system of representation; an order that consists of a series of hierarchised oppositions in which the prior, privileged term is associated with the masculine and the secondary, derivative term with the feminine. As Cixous notes, it is a logic that always returns to that fundamental couple of positive and negative poles:

Man  
Woman

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all its forms, wherever a discourse is organized. The same thread, or double tress, leads us whether we are reading or speaking through literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection.  
(Ss, 90)

Since this couple forms the basis for all other oppositions, it is therefore appropriate that the drama Milton describes is an originary one. And the conflict that sustains this drama -- for are not all good plays concerned with conflict? -- and allows it to be restaged time and time again always has the same climax: the victory of the masculine over the feminine. Metaphorically, the play ends as it begins: with man alone. "He" has everything, "she" has nothing. Order, authority, sovereignty, God, are on his side. (Did not God create Man in His own image?) "She" is of the devil's party and whether she knows it or not is irrelevant for she is passive, devalued, subjugated, *dismissed*. It is a model founded on the notion of presence and absence, where the masculine is always identified with the former term providing the norm by which all else is measured and usually found wanting. Thus "she" is a deficient version of "him"; his negative mirror image. History is written by the winners and in *his* discourse *she* loses -- every time.

Her story is sublimated to his(story). Thus, Adam's question about the nature of woman is as rhetorical as Freud's later question about the nature of her desire:

To pose the question "What do women want?" is to pose it already as answer, as from a man who isn't expecting any answer, because the answer is "She wants nothing". . . . "What does she want?" . . . "Nothing!" Nothing because she is passive. The only thing man can do is offer the question "What could she want, she who wants nothing?" Or in other words: "Without me, what could she want?" (Cixous, CD?, 45)

The specificity of her desire is never acknowledged. The feminine functions in society in the same way that the unconscious functions in the subject; we are the repressed that allows the subject/society to function, the Other that allows the constitution of the One.

In contrast to rhizomatic logic, binary logic relies on constructing and maintaining polar oppositions; the poles must remain equidistant or the world (as we know it) will collapse. The constitution of the One depends upon the identification of the Other -- the *absolute* Other. Distance is the guarantor of the subject/object dialectic; *her* passivity guarantees *his* activity: *Either she is passive; or she doesn't exist*. Ideally, she is both, polarised to such an extent that she no longer enters the picture, and the universe pivots only around him. The speaker in "The Circle Game" catalogues the effects of this confining and yet distancing operation in terms both physical and psychological:

Returning to the room:  
I notice how  
all your word-  
plays, calculated ploys  
of the body, the witticisms  
of touch, are now  
attempts to keep me  
at a certain distance  
and (at length) avoid  
admitting I am here  
(1968: *SP*, 18)

It is significant that the order of his gaze is an imprisoning (binary) quantification: he pins her to the wall in excruciating visual cartography. Given Deleuze and Guattari's description of rhizomatics as the process of infinitely emendable cartographic identifications -- "the rhizome is . . . *a map and not a tracing*" (*OTL*, 25) -- there is an additionally disturbing implication in his action: he "trace[s]" her into fixity.

The inability of the dominant discourse to constitute women in terms other than the negative flip-side of the masculine coinage, points to an economy based on the the order of the Same. As Irigaray has so effectively argued, Freud's construction of femininity is firmly rooted in the logic of the Same for it defines women only by a masculine paradigm. To effect the transition from "little boy" into "little girl" the initial pre-Oedipal clitoral preoccupation must involve a post-Oedipal vaginal transference. This

hypothetical preoccupation and later transference, however, is still within the phallic economy for it defines feminine sexuality only in relation to the penis:

But finally, in Freud, sexual pleasure boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis. And sexual "otherness" comes down to "not having it". Thus, women's lack of penis and her envy of the penis *ensure the function of the negative*, serve as representatives of the negative, in what could be called a *phallocentric* -- or phallotropic -- dialectic.  
(*Spec*, 52)

Thus, in order to become "truly feminine" the little man (girl) must acknowledge that she is incomplete, that she lacks, that she hasn't got (what) it (takes). In the originary game of show and tell she has nothing to display and therefore nothing to say. When Freud lays his cards on the table the trump cards are all marked masculine. These are the cards,

that lie beneath the hierarchy of values of the game, of all the games: the desire for the same, for the self-identical, the self (as) same, and again of the similar, the alter ego and, to put it in a nutshell, the desire for the auto . . . the homo . . . the male, dominates the representational economy.  
(*Spec*, 26)

Incapable of representing her as any other than *his* Other, Freud's specula(ris)tions display a marked preference toward what Irigaray terms *hom(m)osexualité* (*Spec*, 103). It is this desire for the Same/Man that has both haunted and sustained the masculine economy -- the centuries of reflection and representation of which Cixous speaks -- and disallowed any acknowledgement of difference in terms other than its own. By denying the feminine any sexual/libidinal/symbolic specificity of its own, masculine dominance is assured. As Cixous says of the feminine: "she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning" (*TNBW*, 67). By keeping her down (on her back) he keeps (it) up.

Freud's adoption of the Oedipal metaphor (and associated castration complex) did not found the polarities with which the masculine and feminine are defined but rather, contributed to a discourse already well established. Not surprisingly, it is a metaphor that plays into masculine hands, concerned as it is with the desire for origin and with the importance of sight and knowledge. But its status as metaphor -- as *only* a metaphor -- has been forgotten. Like the Phallus (that signifies lack for *everyone*), the Oedipal drama has acquired the status of an ahistorical given, rather than merely a figure of speech. This unacknowledged movement from metaphor to metonymy is one that works to cement the superiority of the One economy over the Other:

The "fact of castration" has to be understood as a definitive prohibition against establishing one's own economy of the desire for origin. Hence, the hole, the lack, the fault, the "castration" that greets the little girl as she enters as a subject into representative systems. This is the indispensable assumption governing her appearance upon the scene of

"presence," where neither her libido nor her sex/organs have any right to any "truth" except the truth that casts her as "less than," other side, backside, of the representation thereby perpetuated."  
(Irigaray, *Spec*, 83)

The "immutable fact" of this representation is one to which Irigaray and Atwood bare their textual backsides.

That Freudian discourse is based upon, indeed perpetuates, the imbalance of that fundamental couple is merely the most obvious example of the hierarchised binary oppositions that dominate the master narratives of our culture. But the binary logic on which these tales are based has not gone unquestioned; in Atwood's texts these tall tales are ruthlessly cut down to size. Both Cixous' and Irigaray's critique of master narratives involves the interrogation of the *a priori* assumptions on which those (his)stories are founded, the blindness that allows insight. Given that they expose and then displace these fundamental expressions/repressions their project is essentially a deconstructionist one. In their attention to what has been marginalised by a dominant discourse, deconstruction and the feminist critique have much in common. Claiming that the whole history of Western thought has been, and continues to be, pervaded by the metaphysics of presence, Derrida examines the model by which meaning is made possible. By foregrounding the repressed in the dominant narratives -- the repressed that allows the system's functioning -- Derrida contributes to the destabilisation of notions of centrality and essentiality so precious to the Western ethos. By strategic reversals of "innate" privilege accorded one term at the expense of the other, he shows that what is present is always marked by what is absent, that the One is always already marked by the Other. His is a parasitic project, but one that is productive as well as reductive; by subjecting binary logic to the logic of supplementarity, *différance*, trace, gram, etc, any claims of fully self-present unity, centrality or totality are summarily dismissed. And as Derrida and the French feminists have pointed out, the discourse that privileges the masculine by systematically repressing the feminine is the hegemonic discourse of phallogocentrism.

That the (feminist) deconstructionist project is dismissed -- read considered dangerous and subversive -- by authorities steeped in phallogocentric epistemology is no doubt due to its strategic positionality, its place both inside and outside the discourse it displaces.<sup>1</sup> For deconstruction is not merely another discourse in competition with the dominant one (and one that can be effectively silenced by being completely ignored) but challenges authority on the very terms by which it constitutes itself. Adhering to the logic of the parent text deconstruction exposes the "universality" of its *a priori* assumptions and leads its metaphors to a point of aporia. Plenitude is led to its logical point of exhaustion. How strange that the parent should consider the child insubordinate for taking him quite literally at his Word. As Atwood demonstrates, however, such "wilful" mis-readings have an explosive effect.

In a manner reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" (222-4), Irigaray responds to Freud's lecture on femininity with biting sardonic irony (*Spec*, 47). Questioning the Father's Word, she exposes the blindspot in Freud's nostalgic dream of symmetry. (Cixous, however, strikes the same pose by casting Freud (and Lacan) as the archetypal peeping Tom and deflates his transcendental signifier with one prick of her well-honed needle [*Ss*, 95; *LM*, 262]). Both feminists challenge Freud as an exemplar of the ubiquity of the phallogocentric doctrine. What is obvious is that he is merely the tip of an iceberg that lies barely submerged within the philosophic system; a system that openly or insidiously freezes out the feminine. Contemplating the return of the repressed -- the thawing out of the Medusa -- Cixous gleefully contemplates the fate of the ruling masculine religion: "What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?" (*LM*, 92-3). Considering the importance of the phallus/Phallus to this order and the "nécessité" of positing women's lack in confirmation of man's possession, a more appropriate translation would be "if the foundation upon which they built their erections should subside." In any case, masculinity and unity are as much a fantasy as femininity and lack. Both are discursive formations rather than differentiations based on real identities. The former is ideal because it links men to the symbolic phallus rather than the real genital configuration (which is in fact made up of penis *and* testicles). Phallogocentric logic, therefore, like the Cartesian *cogito*, masks its own division with an image of unity. This blind devotion to singularity ignores a tripartite basis in order to display a united front. Also "ignorant" concerning the father's epistemologies -- reason, science, law, philosophy -- Atwood joins with these psychoanalytic daughters to repeat that irritatingly child-like question: *Why?* The knowledge gained, however, is not "received".

Thus, these insubordinate children represent a breach in fictional, psychoanalytic and philosophical propriety by challenging immutable "laws" which spring from masculine rather than feminine concerns. Taking up the Father's Word they do not necessarily accept the "obvious" conclusions of his linear teleologies (or else they force the very letter of that law and turn the undeviating advance of its discursive machinery back upon itself). *Possessing* his discourse, they are not *possessed* by it. Whilst the action may imply the replacement of One regime by the Other the movement is not of the same autocratic order. Rather, it is the strategic gesture -- Cixous calls it the woman's gesture -- of subversive flight/stealth. Playing upon the double meaning of the term *voler*, Cixous uses the activities of birds and robbers as metaphors for "the woman-effect": "They (*illes*) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocation things and values, breaching them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" (*LM*, 258). And

this disruptive woman-effect is one that Atwood's texts embody. In the face of the masculine monolith, the phallic empire, the marginalised strikes back with guerilla tactics. Whilst the Father's erections may be temporarily deflated, they always manage to rise up again, hence the need of a continuing strategy of subversion; a series of kicks against the pricks. Although the strategy has affinities with guerilla warfare, the metaphor is useful only to a point, marked as it is by the negativity of that fundamental opposition: authority/subversion, civilisation/anarchy, light/dark, man/woman. The unsettling force of this deconstructive stance comes from its position within the discourse it critiques, even as it stands metaphorically outside it:<sup>2</sup>

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible, nor effective, nor can they take accurate aims except by inhabiting those structures, inhabiting then *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more, when one does not suspect it.

(Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24)

And it is the *way* that masculine discourses are inhabited that proves so disruptive of their authority. Rather than unquestioningly accepting the received word of the phallogocentric Bible, Atwood, Cixous and Irigaray subject it to some severe interrogation, suspicious, indeed outrightly dismissive, of any form of hierarchised binary logic. All add improper insults to metaphoric injuries by their flat refusal to "bear" the fruit of the Father's Word: the minus sign:

But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father.

(Cixous, LM, 255)

But why would this situation be unchanging? Why can one not transcend that [Aristotelian] logic? To speak outside of it?

(Irigaray, WE, 64)

Since both Cixous and Irigaray are engaged in deconstructing the phallogocentric principles behind the philosophical discourse of master narratives, their project is by necessity intellectually demanding (often uncompromisingly so). Entering those narrative fields they soundly trounce the masters on their own discursive turf. Challenging their implicitly universal claims to Truth, they have shed light on some rather murky aspects of the master narrators own discursive strategies. Although less ontotheologically specific (but no less intellectually complex), Atwood's texts display the same concern with the displacement of phallogocentric thought and the same theoretical strategies and poetic, discursive practices with which it is effected. The mythological performance of masculine dramas that provokes such scathing feminist debate is textually re-staged. Settling in for the performance of those comfortably familiar plays is not advisable, however. Initially, the plot may seem recognisable and the characters stereotypically

correct but in these dramatic reconstructions the end may not be predetermined by the beginning. Refusing to honour the Father's Word, Atwood's texts contain little in the way of filial respect to dominant (patriarchal) ideologies. Her infidelities are endless. The laconic/ironic voices that rise from the page (especially in her poetry) combine cool interrogation with "naively" impertinent questions. Whilst the tactics employed are sometimes openly confrontational, they are more often than not subtle and indirect. As masculine assumptions are progressively undermined, they are unmasked as presumptions masquerading as ultimate truths. Atwood takes a peek behind the Father's curtain and discovers not the eternal Phallus but a tiny pocket signifier. Under coolly skeptical scrutiny, the "objective" logic that casts the feminine as oppositional lack and/or complementary hole loses its ahistorical status.

*Power Politics* is initiated by similar verbal and visual evocations of the "natural" relations of the fundamental couple. The frontispiece depicts a trussed and captive woman hanging trophy-like from the arm of an armoured and visored knight.<sup>3</sup> The epigraph shatters the supposed complementarity of the negative and positive poles with an image of visceral intensity:

*you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye*

*a fish hook  
an open eye  
(1971: SP, 141)*

As McCombs aptly points out, and the poetry sequence shows, the apparent one-way traffic in victimisation is not so unambiguously clear-cut: whilst the woman is obviously held captive by her bonds, her weight would cause her captor excruciating pain ("Atwood's Haunted Sequences", 47). Although women are not the only victims of sexual opposition, the couple's entrapment in an endless circle game is implicitly due to the warfare imposed by (masculine) binary logic. Thus, the apparently innocent ring-a-rosie image of children dancing at the beginning of "The Circle Game" becomes a metaphor for the zombie-like repetitious circling of that familiar couple (1968: *SP*, 14-24). The reason for the dance has been lost to be replaced by a mindless and perpetual automatism. Only in the final sequence is the "game" revealed as a dance of obligation rather than of choice, and one that operates according to *his* rigid rules:

*You make them  
turn and turn, according to  
the closed rules of your games,  
but there is no joy in it  
(1968: SP, 23)*

Significantly, it is the female speaker who wants to escape his "prisoning rhythms", destroy the coloniser's cartographic reference points and break the circle to go free. Only she, it would appear, can envisage a system outside his (self) centered one.



His game, his system, his order is an imposition rather than a spontaneous movement. Perhaps it is an entertainment so oft-played that joyful execution has been replaced by enforced tedium. Who wants to play a game that isn't fun any more? Indeed, was it *ever* enjoyable? It requires an austere level of concentration; eyes are "fixed", attitudes are "intent", "studious". In *this* game mirth is notably absent. Participation seems to require the proper level of decorum; both the song and the measured tread are decreed by his canon. It is little wonder that the female speaker finds his religion imprisoning, and his attentions imperialistic. Gazing at her, he sees a two-dimensional cartographer's image. It is what Lorna Irvine refers to as the hieroglyph of feminine sexuality:

Women's writing pictures the body directly and figuratively. Like that body, its surface disguises what culture has kept hidden: the gaps, the fissures, the holes that signify textual repression. Often hieratical, the markings that denote the female body insist on sacred interpretation. Thus, in that shift from picture to written sign, from body to text, the priests have guarded the representation of women. Interpretation falls to them. Words, letters and syllables assume levels, become the matter of exegesis, and the female body holds together, symbolically the carnal and the sacred. In itself, it remains mysterious, magical, hidden, infinitely interpretable: powerless. As object, it cannot speak. Gradually, the hieroglyphics assume another meaning; what they picture is no longer what they represent.  
(*Sub/ersion*, 23)

Whilst I am less convinced by Irvine's assertion that women's writing is similarly hieroglyphic -- and therefore requiring only the *right* interpretation -- her suggestion that the only reading of femininity is that proffered by a brethren of the elect is compelling. Atwood makes a similar observation in "Iconography", where the male artist controls both the visual and the textual representation of the female body: "He has the last word. He has the word" (*MD*, 52). This sacred interpretation seems to manifest itself on every level of exegesis.

"She" is the hole in his discourse. On one level it is "a fact" continuously repeated; on another it is a space in that text that is continually covered over, disguised, refuted. For the priests of interpretation, "she" is a puzzling (abnormal) question but one to which only they have the answer. And, as Atwood demonstrates in "Worship", it is the same answer, the answer of the Same. Even in the highest echelons of the brethren *homosexualité* is rife. (Freud focuses on the feminine hysteric; Lacan identifies Bernini's St Teresa's abandon as the mark of feminine *jouissance*: *la mère qui jouit* in response to the light of the ultimate phallic authority.) Within this discourse women are either Holy or whore-ly; it matters little which since both are the (passive) recipients of masculine "devotions". "Worship" connects these two (veiled) identifications -- the sanctity of the female chalice and sexual mastery over the (w)hole -- and exposes the grounds on which his religion is founded. Here, the female body is not individual and

specific but the passive object of a male ritual; a hollow ritual that has little to do with selflessness and everything to do with selfishness. For the body is not valuable in and of itself, but acts merely as a symbol, a means, a vehicle for sanctification: "You aren't really a god but despite that you're silent. When you're being worshipped there isn't much to say." Woman as symbol; the silent embodiment of whatever *he* wants to represent. And what underwrites even this valorised position are the same negative oppositional characteristics attributed to the feminine in less exalted situations. Women remain the blank to be filled in, the hole to be filled, the originary space to be mapped and penetrated: "Jesus, Jesus he says, but he's not praying to Jesus, he's praying to you, not to your body or face but *to that space you hold at the centre, which is the shape of the universe. Empty.* He wants response, an answer from that dark sphere and its red stars, *which he can touch but not see*" (my emphasis). Thus, the apparent privileged status accorded her is phallicious for she is valued only in relation to masculine desire. The chalice is revealed as neither the Grail nor the Eucharist, but a utilitarian vessel for the masculine feast. The directness of the address and yet the non-specificity of the pronoun "you" signals the widespread implications of this religious doctrine. As a woman, you are "like a chalice, burnished; with use and service. After you've been serviced, after you've been used, you'll be put away again until needed." This double-edged conclusion is a pre-echo of Offred's comment in *The Handmaid's Tale*: "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (146). The worship offered is without integrity; a placatory veil to the real agenda. That the most frequent gift he bestows is also that used to pacify and win over children is not insignificant. As Jocasta sardonically remarks on the power politics of new age sexual relations: "It helps if you're eight years old, one way or another. You follow me?" (*Bodily Harm*, 167).<sup>4</sup> Although the devotions may seem sweet the long-term effects of these offerings are detrimental: "You have these sores in your mouth that will not heal. It's from eating too much sugar. . . ."5

Visually, psychically, the female body is colonised by the masculine. That the penetration is neither merely metaphorical nor mythic is a recurring observation -- sometimes graphically illustrated -- in Atwood's corpus. Signalling its association with the narratives of *Boys' Own Annuals*, "Adventure Story" evokes a number of other masculine mythologies: space odysseys, Adamic creation and naming and the Age of Discovery (1985-6: *SP II*, 162-3). The fundamental allusion is to the space of the frontier: that dangerous and alien territory to be entered and explored. As the final parenthetical observation reveals, the other-worldly dark continent that is being penetrated, the "empty space" that is being inhabited, the citadel that is being stormed, is that of the female body. Implicitly, this archetypal interior is being penetrated by the speculum of a masculine economy: that which privileges the proof of sight over the

evidence of other sensory perceptions. Her space is the final frontier to be illuminated and inhabited, captured on film and relayed to the "home country". But the innocence of indisputable visual proof of a fictionalised myth of origins is belied by a deconstructive turn. Just as the metaphors reveal an opposition of mythic proportions, so the means of proving that myth is logistically teased out to a disturbing conclusion: "(Now how the hell did they do it, you wonder. Lasers, they say: but who was watching, and where were they standing, and what next?)" It would appear that authority -- be it medical, scientific, psychological or religious -- is the preserve of the masculine.

In all these *humanistic* epistemologies, however, no account is taken of feminine specificity or subjectivity. She is the *object* of enquiry, or she is absent. The epistemological armour he assumes is in fact de-humanising. Thus, in an effort to recuperate the masculine, the narrator of "Liking Men" starts with an exposed (and vulnerable) part of the body: the neck (*MD*, 53-4). Its proximity to the seat of Rationality is, however, a little too close for comfort: "But for most of us, especially the beginners, its best to start with the feet and work up. To begin with the head and all it contains would be too suddenly painful." Temporarily reassured by thoughts of pleasurable bodily contact/body language, her defences are lowered and she moves to the contemplation of garments. Her unwitting mistake leads her down a disturbing associational path. Associations that juxtapose the mythical and historical with the contemporary, bear seemingly inevitable testimony to the absurdity of her desire. One boot leads ineluctably to another:

Now you see rows of them, marching, marching: yours is the street-level view, because you are lying down. Power is the power to smash, two hold your legs, two your arms, the fifth shoves a pointed instrument into you: a bayonet, the neck of a broken bottle, and it's not even wartime, this is a park, with a children's playground, tiny red and yellow horses, it's daytime, men and women stare at you out of their closed car windows. Later the policemen will ask you what you did to provoke this. Boots were not such a bright idea after all.

Considering the contemporary frequency of similar violations, such metonymical displacement is not inaccurate. Donning the uniform (even the footwear) of regulation masculinity, "he" runs the risk of donning the oppressive, faceless visor of power. It is a power that eventually rapes not only the feminine but also humanity. Only by a generous act of faith on her part, and an originary, humanising vulnerability on his, can the affective miracle occur.

The Law that regulates the representational two-term system is one that *instigates* rather than condemns this violence. In the male/female dialectic that Cixous identifies in "Sorties", death is always meted out to the lesser, inferior feminine term:

And the movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war breaks out. . . . And we

perceive that the "victory" always amounts to the same thing: it is hierarchized. The hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. A male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between *activity* and *passivity*. (Ss, 91)

The metaphorical death that Cixous identifies at work in this opposition is literally exhibited in "A Women's Issue" (1981: *SP II*, 76-7). Here, the genital configuration that gives rise to symbolic inferiority is graphically violated. Moving from the particular to the general, the speaker registers the incomprehensibility of the logic that informs this battle and an almost desperate disbelief in its pervasive nature:

You'll notice that what they have in common  
is between the legs. Is this  
why wars are fought?  
Enemy territory, no man's  
land, to be entered furtively,  
fenced, owned but never surely,  
scene of these desperate forays  
at midnight, captures  
and sticky murders, doctors' rubber gloves  
greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the surge  
of your own uneasy power.

The exhibits, however, are not the artifacts of an obsolete era for "this is no museum". Considering the fate of the feminine in the couple's "union" the appropriateness of the word "love" is indeed an apt question to raise, as the final line of the poem does.

The consequences of a marriage viewed only as an eternal battle are injurious to all concerned. "Speeches for Dr Frankenstein" explores not only the activity of the Victor, but also his subsequent realisation that the fruit of his labour is a Pyrrhic conquest (1968: *SP*, 64-9). Usurping the feminine progenitive capacity, Victor can only construct his own negative embodiment. Locked in the logic of oppositional forces, he shapes a combatant whose form is necessarily inferior to his own, a castrated version of his own superior status:

I circle, confront  
my opponent. The thing  
  
refuses to be shaped, it moves  
like yeast. . . .  
.....  
It springs. I cut  
*with delicate precision*  
.....  
The thing falls Thud. A cat  
*anatomized.*  
(My emphasis)<sup>6</sup>

Denying the feminine, Victor is in fact haunted by it. Attempting to create a god he creates the monster of his fears: "You are red, / you are human and distorted." How can he love his opposite, his enemy? Victor's scientific enterprise represents pragmatic logic

taken to its extreme. By circumventing the maternal he effects (through his Creature) the certain death of anyone linked with, or displaying, the maternal traits that he subconsciously rejects. In his world woman is not only silent; she does not exist. Yet the construction of the Other is something that *he* facilitates and it leads ultimately to his destruction. Pursuing the feminine principle -- to the death -- Victor is led to his own doom. Repeatedly refused entry to the symbolic order of the Same, the Creature embraces the alien territory of the icy continent. There, gambolling freely in the polar waste the Creature rejects the law that oppressed *her*:

You sliced me loose

and said it was  
Creation. I could feel the knife.  
How you would like to heal  
that chasm in your side,  
but I recede. I prowl.

I will not come when you call.

Yet the Reason (that masks its own desire) that prompted this unfortunate experiment is the basis of modern civilisation. (It is significant that the Creature can only exist on the peripheries of that social order). Like Faustus, Frankenstein does not consider the moral consequences of his action. For Rationality, the only error lies in a miscalculation in logic. The mind is necessarily privileged over the body. This split between sense and sensibility, head and heart is the fuel that drives the phallocentric engine: "that enormous machine that has been operating and turning out its truth for centuries" (Cixous, Ss, 249). This is the logic subscribed to by the narrator's father in *Surfacing*. His god is intellect and his library exhibits this preoccupation: his favourite authors hail from the Age of Reason. Their rational philosophy posits that there is nothing in Nature which cannot be apprehended (controlled) by the power of the human mind. This philosophy is increasingly seen by the narrator as a negative theology and both the father and the brother are characterised by their attempts to label and categorize in an imprisoning quantification. Frankenstein's address to his Creature makes an interesting comparison:

What web shall I wrap you in  
Gradually I pin you down.

What equation shall  
I carve and seal in your skull?

But his logic is a violating one. As the narrator says, "order is made with knives" (186). The pragmatism of this logic is the same pragmatism that prompted the final solution (59). Thus the enforced abortion that has so traumatised the narrator is viewed as the result of this reasoned stance:

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't. . . .  
(144-5)

Considering the consequences of this "union" the narrator refuses to make the same mistake again: "No," I said, the only answer to logic' (86). The dialectic of power on which Reason is based refuses the possibility of any other epistemology. In the mythical section that concludes the novel it is an error of exclusion that both the narrator and her father acknowledge: "He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as *logic excludes love*" (186, my emphasis). So, in denying the specificity of the Other or in colonising her body in the Same old conquest, it would appear that even the mystery of creation is something over which the masculine has control. (After all, the Father created Adam without reference to or need of any feminine deity.)

From the works discussed here, it should be obvious that Atwood's texts continually expose the disempowering effects of masculine attentions (or lack of them). But they also contain a sense of perplexity concerning the desire that drives this epistemology. Examining the products of pop culture, projected masculine fantasies are subjected to a different kind of scrutiny. Noting the attraction of the lycanthropic plot to some male psyches, the speaker in "Werewolf Movies" queries the purpose of the werewolf's violent revolt:

. . . But  
no animal does that: couple and kill,  
or kill first: rip up its egg, its future.  
No animal eats its mate's throat, except  
spiders and certain insects, when it's the protein  
male who's gobbled. Why do they have this dream then?  
(1985-6: *SP II*, 160)

The possibility explored is that of the perceived entrapment by the domestic ideal. Yet the banality of the imprisoning objects is an implicit comment on the seriousness of masculine paranoia. Another and more disturbing implication is signalled by the adjectives that define these objects: the pillowcase "big with pillow"; the teacosy "swollen with its warm pot"; "the round tummies" of string. Again the maternal is posited as something that can only be overtaken or erased. It is an observation that Irigaray also makes; a feminine interpretation of a mythological horror story:

For the power of the female sex has to be conquered over and over again. The head of the family has to re-insure his potency. Every single day, therefore, he is enjoined to reappropriate the right to exploit blood, and then, as a result, to go on to more sublime pursuits. The

master is a vampire who needs to stay in disguise and do his work at night. Otherwise he is reminded that he is dependent on death. And on birth. On the material, uterine foundation of his mastery. Only if these be repressed can he enjoy sole ownership.  
(*Spec*, 126-7)

She must surrender all or die. In the play of opposites there can be no union.

Yet the religious instruction that decrees her Other -- either Madonna or whore -- is not carried out to the letter. The order is registered, but it is not necessarily slavishly obeyed. The spaces of Heaven and Hell get re-ordered, rearranged, positively jumbled. Just as Cixous is concerned with the positive inscription of femininity in a discourse in which it is negatively marked, so Atwood is concerned with re-valuing the position of the feminine in the canonical text. The third section of "A Red Shirt" (1978: *SP II*, 48-50), presents the traditional dichotomous masculine narrative (and its inherent contradiction), but the narrator subsequently notes the animosity of this mythology:

. . . My  
daughter, I would like  
your shirt to be just a shirt,  
no charms or fables. But fables  
and charms swarm here  
in this January world,  
entrenching us like snow, and few  
are friendly to you. . . .

The obligation, however, of recasting these narratives through a feminine lens is the necessity of establishing a counter tradition. As the speaker in "Two-Headed Poems" says, "history / breeds death but if you kill / it you kill yourself" (1978: *SP II*, 34). Therefore "Harvest" (1984: *SP II*, 136-7), with its insistent personalised drama presents an account other than that of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Dominant narratives, however, are premised on the fact that dead women tell no tales:

For so much time, our history  
was written in bones only.

Our flag has been silence,  
which was mistaken for no flag,  
which was mistaken for peace.  
("Two-Headed Poems", 1978: *SP II*, 29)

Just because the natives are quiet does not mean they are content. The mother in "A Red Shirt" revives the weaving of spells in a talismanic gesture of feminised protective power. Similarly, the Madonna image so "scandalously" undermined in "Worship", is given an equally personal emphasis in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine Risley's Madonna paintings refute the saccharin-sweet images of canonical representations (Raphael's examples spring to mind), and establish an iconography of a rather different nature:

I paint her in blue, the usual white veil, but with the head of a lioness.  
Christ lies in her lap in the form of a cub. If Christ is a lion, as he is in  
traditional iconography, why wouldn't the Virgin Mary be a lioness?

Anyway it seems to me more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk and water Virgins of art history. My Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild. She stares levelly out at the viewer with her yellow lion's eyes.  
(345)

Elaine takes the logic of the masculine economy of representation to its inevitable conclusion, to create not an image of passivity but one of potency. Therefore, the gnawed bone lying at the lioness's feet is not an insignificant detail but an insistent reminder of latent power. But her iconoclasm is not confined to a singular interpretation. Another version casts the Madonna in Risley's dramatisation of contemporary motherhood. Rather than an immortal creature unhampered by worldly concerns, Elaine depicts her as the domestic drudge she feels *she* has become. Elaine's paintings represent both a general ideological challenge and a contextually specific personal response to the archetypal domestic idyll.

If traditional iconography receives a few well-placed strikes, then traditional iconology sustains similar injury. Just as the received image of the Virgin reinscribes the passivity of the feminine so the approved symbolism of colours signals similar gender stereotyping. An appropriately unknown man is the exponent of this doctrine in "A Red Shirt" (1978: *SP II*, 48-50). His claim that young girls should be clad in white rather than red garments is metaphorically teased out by the female narrator: "A girl should be / a veil, a white shadow, bloodless / as a moon on water." The wearing of red is somehow dangerous (to whom one might ask?), and the fairy-tale of "The Red Dancing Shoes" is ironically invoked as reinforcement of the dire consequences of feminine pleasure seeking. But as the narrator notes, for better or worse the colour red is women's birthright. The heritage of blood in all its forms is one in which all women share and therefore "the shirt we make is stained / with our words, our stories." History is ruptured by a specifically feminine narrative; "she draws her story into history" (Cixous, LM, 251). Whilst it is certainly not true that "one myth cancels another", in the concluding lines of "A Red Shirt" the punitive narrative of "The Red Dancing Shoes" is positively re-written.

This positive reinscription includes the hellish creatures of masculine folklore. With the same gesture that characterised the work of the sister sewers in "A Red Shirt" Atwood dedicates *The Handmaid's Tale* to Mary Webster: an ancestress unsuccessfully hung for witchcraft (1980: "Witches", *SW*, 331). In the dystopian extension of contemporary society, the binaries that fund the phallogentric system still apply. Challenging these oppositions, Offred makes the traditionally marginalised figures in that economy into symbols of rebellion. In a society devoted to enforced fertility, those who take control of their own bodies by choosing celibacy constitute the greatest threat. Converted nuns are forced to take the red veil instead, being considered too dangerous to become Wives for "there's an odour of witch about them, something mysterious and



exotic" (232). In the same way that the red shirt carries "the private magic" of the feminine heritage, swearing carries the subversive odour of feminine sorcery: "There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, something secretive, forbidden, thrilling. *It's like a spell of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with*" (234, my emphasis). Offred implicitly identifies herself with this sisterhood; in her isolation she longs for a pet, "a bird say, or a cat. *A familiar*" (120, my emphasis). Witchcraft is cast not as the terrifying phantasm of masculine fantasy, but the disruptive potency of a feminine economy. Confronting her mirror image after her escape from the logic that governs this system, the narrator in *Surfacing* identifies and deconstructs these phantasmal constructions:

This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. . . . They would never believe it's only *a natural woman*, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bath-mat stuck with leaves and twigs. *A new kind of centrefold.*  
(190, my emphasis)

But these phantasies persist, uniform in nature and monotonous in the regularity with which they recur. In the representative folklore there are only princesses and hags. (Isn't there a wicked witch lurking at the peripheries of every happy-ever-after?) As *Surfacing* and "Harvest" (among others) suggest, as far as the feminine is concerned these stories are only variations on a common theme (1984: *SPH*, 136-7). She is either a beautiful, passive object to be won or an ugly fiend to be vanquished. Both are to be conquered but only she who resists heroic authority is cast as a nightmarish vision: the archetypal Medusa. Thus, "the witch" in "Harvest" is merely symptomatic of the Other as scapegoat; one that embodies the dualities of *masculine* desire. And what of that persistent, raucous cackle? Why is she always laughing and why must her "sinister" enjoyment be quelled, time and time again by *every* hero? Perhaps because her amusement is the fruit of ridicule; a rejection of the serious principles upon which his heroism is founded. In poking fun she pokes the phallogocentric balloon into instant deflation. Perhaps because her hilarity is threatening to a mythological Church that is established and sacrosanct. As both Bakhtin and Kristeva have demonstrated, there is nothing more transgressive of austere, regimented authority than the abandon of uncontrolled laughter. Whilst Atwood's texts display a clear understanding of the dangers presented by this authority, the mythological phantasies that underpin it are often laughed right out of court. All of the so-called masculine attributes that make of man a superman are subjected to some rather caustic scrutiny and/or deconstructive ridicule. He who fights for truth, justice and the phallogocentric way is reduced to merely another example of consumer advertising: "you hang suspended above the city / in blue tights and

a red cape, / your eyes flashing in unison" (1971: "They eat out", *SP*, 44-5). Unimpressed by his ostentatious display, his Lois Lane concentrates on her meal. A similar demonstration of heroic authority is undermined in "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" where the child-like implications of that compound noun are initially foregrounded:

Starspangled cowboy  
sauntering out of the almost-  
silly West, on your face  
a porcelain grin,  
tugging a papier-mâché cactus  
on wheels behind you with a string,  
(1968: *SP*, 70)

But the infantile innocence of this diversion -- this dress-ups for boys -- is belied by its consequences. As harmless as "a bathtub / full of bullets" he leaves behind him "a heroic / trail of desolation". Instead of blazing a trail of righteousness, his journey is one of possessive desecration. Again, however, the heroine's adulation is not forthcoming, rather the heroic posture has all the appeal of a sit-com re-run. Registering the expectation that she "ought to be watching. . . . when the shooting starts, hands clasped / in admiration" the implicitly feminine speaker rejects this stereotypical response for a more honest relation of indifference: "but I am elsewhere."

Whilst supermen and cowboys are tackled in a comic deflation of contemporary culture heroes, in "Circe/Mud Poems" Atwood takes on one of the literary "big boys" of cultural history: Odysseus (1974: *SP*, 201-23). In revaluing this myth Atwood exposes and deconstructs its privileged place in the history of Western phantasy. The association of Circe's island with slanted holiday advertising is surely indicative of the wholesale distribution of this seductive story to a gullible public (201). Similarly, the admiration accorded the Odyssean "I" as agent and author of his own destiny is shown to be ill-founded. Odysseus is revealed not as the victorious conqueror, but the pawn in a larger game. The self that he presumes he is in control of (which is in fact a constructed self as he narrates/fictionalises his heroic experience) is a phallacious one. What this poetic cycle constitutes in varying forms is the reduction of this heroic "I" to a lower case letter in *another* signifying chain. The "I" is revealed as a theoretical fiction; an orthopoedic art(i)fice. And interestingly enough it is a *sorceress* who effects this phallic shrinkage. Circe's story is other than that of the heroic narrative and her questions disturb the teleology of this quest:

Don't you get tired of killing  
those whose deaths have been predicted  
and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting  
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward?  
(206)

Again, the stereotypical apparel of heroism is invoked, not as testimony to his gallant benevolence but as a factor constitutive of its loss. Odysseus body becomes a transmutation of the armour of his thorax (one that is so close fitting it is almost like a real skin). Confronting him, the organic fluidity of Circe's expressions assume the same rigid proportions:

My face, my other faces  
stretching over it like  
rubber, like flowers opening  
and closing, like rubber,  
like liquid steel,  
like steel. Face of steel.

Look at me and see your reflection.  
(210)

Assuming the uniform of power and the visor of oculocentrism, the masculine effects the denial of humanity. In this context, Circe's rejection of mythic men is certainly justified. Instead she seeks the others, "the ones left over, / the ones who have escaped from these / mythologies with barely their lives"; those men who have "real faces and hands" (202).

But the mythology persists, hawked off on every literary street corner, sold to every unsuspecting buyer. It fuels the canon. (Did not Pound commence his epic, *The Cantos* -- a poem that "includes human history" -- with a deferential nod in Odysseus's direction? Intent on reinvigorating the contemporary morass, he chose Odysseus (among others) as the symbol of intellectual vigour and aggressive sexuality.) And the mythology has acquired religious status; a phantasy of power that *all* must worship. *Ecce Phallus*. Cixous documents the decree of this ideology and the uselessness of feminine prostration to it: "As a woman, I've been clouded over by the great shadow of the sceptre and been told: idolize it, that which you cannot brandish" (LM, 254). With "Women's Novels", Atwood questions the canonical brainwashing that supposedly secures this situation (MD, 34-6). A perceptive yet determinedly obtuse narrator governs the examination of novels by men and women; the effect is alternately sadly recognisable and deliciously subversive but it is always comic. The catalogue of definitions the narrator proffers are not only fairly accurate generalisations about textual distinctions (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries at least), but also about the attitudinal tendencies that influence them: "Some people think a women's novel is anything without politics in it. . . . Some think it's anything that doesn't give you a broad panoramic view of our exciting

times." The central preoccupations in the different textual territories reflect the sanctioned responses to phallocratic ideology: "Men's novels are about how to get power. Killing and so on, or winning and so on. . . . In men's novels, getting the woman or women goes along with getting the power. It's a perk not a means. In women's novels you get the power by getting the man. The man is the power." The quality of the comic exposure is such that it is worth reproducing in full:

Men's novels are about men. Women's novels are about men too but from a different point of view. You can have a men's novel with no women in it except possibly the landlady or the horse, but you can't have a women's novel with no men in it. Sometimes men put women in men's novels but they leave out some of the parts: the heads, for instance, or the hands. Women's novels leave out parts of the men as well. Sometimes it's the stretch between the belly button and the knees, sometimes it's the sense of humour. It's hard to have a sense of humour in a cloak, in a high wind, on a moor.

Women do not usually write novels of the type favoured by men but men are known to write novels of the type favoured by women. Some people find this odd.

That a popular, successful tale can be told that ignores half of humankind is only the logical extension of the victory of the masculine in every instance. The possible obscurity of women's appearance in mutated form is horrifyingly illuminated by the traveller's narrative in "Circe/Mud Poems". The rape of the objectified, *sculpted* mud woman without equal is made all the more symbolic by her lack of specific identity: "She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials" (214). In the light of Circe's desire for masculine humanity -- for real faces and hands -- it would appear that the masculine economy is unwilling to grant the feminine even that privilege. In the context of the traveller's tale it is hardly surprising that women novelists omit an area indicative of the dehumanising effects of oppressive power. The idolatry required of the attributes of this giant sceptre is nowhere more subtly noted (and just as subtly challenged) than with the concluding lines. That Atwood merely draws our attention to a logical anomaly without labouring the point of the investigation gives the deconstructive turn an additional ironic savour.

Obviously an heroic mythology does not have the wholehearted interest that a masculine economy would proclaim. At the conclusion of "Circe/Mud Poems" the received Homeric narrative is cast as an inverted comic strip run over and over in an increasingly staccato rhythm (222).<sup>7</sup> In a similar fashion, the narrator of *Power Politics* casts their mythic relationship as a B-grade celluloid prison: "You take my hand and / I'm suddenly in a bad movie" (1971: *SP*, 142). It is, however, a spectacle in which she is both participant and junkie. He is the drug to which she is addicted,

yes at first you  
go down smooth as  
pills, all of me  
breathes you in. . . .  
(*SP*, 151)

but the masculine fix is potentially fatal. It is unclear whether the "kick in the head" is an effect of pleasure or pain. In any case, the high produced is a reductive one and the long-term effects of their relationship de-humanising:

. . . our heads float  
several inches above our necks  
moored to us by  
rubber tubes and filled with  
clever bubbles  
(*SP*, 148)

(This clinical severance of mind and body is reminiscent of the narrator's experience in *Surfacing*). This habit seems to result in symbolic (and sometimes bodily) paralysis. Thus, the poem in the collection that most closely corresponds to the illustration on its cover explodes the efficacy of chivalric attentiveness on which the courtly tradition is based:

. . . General, you enlist  
my body in your heroic  
struggle to become real:  
though you promise bronze rescues  
  
you hold me by the left ankle  
so that my head brushes the ground,  
my eyes are blinded  
my hair fills with white ribbons  
(*SP*, 147)

His confining actions are similar to that of the Bluebeard figure who dominates "Hesitations outside the door":

This is your castle, this your metal door,  
these are your stairs, your  
  
bones, you twist all possible  
dimensions into your own  
(*SP*, 169)

So, even a masculine mythology is governed by the law of the Same: the necessity of positing an Other in the definition of Self. The consequence for the feminine of the "devotions" of this blindly singular economy is either castration: "I lie mutilated beside / you. . . the ends of your fingers bleed / from 1000 murders (*SP*, 167), or death:

your mouth is nothingness  
where it touches me I vanish  
  
you descend on me like age  
you descend on me like earth  
(*SP*, 174)

One of the major foci of the cycle, however, is the reflection back upon the masculine of an image of his own destructiveness. The artless sincerity he affects is like that of Odysseus in "Circe/Mud Poems":

your mind you say,  
is like your hands, vacant:

vacant is not innocent  
(SP, 205)

The uniform of power prohibits any other kind of garment. Thus, he avoids "the sleeves of the bargains" held out to him (SP, 176). Just as he is unwilling to discard this mythological apparel, so he is unwilling to relinquish this binary warfare. But, like the addressee in "Tricks with Mirrors" (1974: SP, 183-6), the image proffered is not quite what he desires. Trapped in that Same old narrative, even his one insistent demand is self-centered: "love without mirrors and not for / my reasons but your own" (SP, 176).

The egocentrism of this self-serving folklore is projected into the future in "Simmering" (MD, 31-3). Like Zeno's arrow, this short fiction is marked by both past and present events. With a narrative that translates Cixous' *voler* metaphor into a stark and subversive reality, this feminist historian exposes the loaded metaphors that work to support the phallogocentric structure of presuppositions. "Simmering" explores the masculine urge to dominate and the accompanying masculinisation (and therefore privileging) of any activity they undertake. In a satiric fashion, the appropriation of traditionally feminine activities exposes the "will to naturalise" preferred traits or activities into ahistorical givens. Although the traditional gender stereotypes are reversed, the inegalitarian status quo remains: "It was pointed out to the women, who by this time did not go into the kitchens at all on pain of being thought unfeminine, that *chef* after all means *chief* and that Mixmasters were common but no one had ever heard of a Mixmistress." To seal the assertion and justify the behaviour the same ultimate transcendental are appealed to: "If Nature had meant women to cook, it was said, God would have made carving knives round and with holes in them." Familiar prejudices abound and the masculine is still the privileged gender; it is just that the activities "normally" associated with that gender have been hilariously swapped. But what is comic is also sinister for in the changed "liberated" pattern women are still relegated to silence and the same psychological and biological constructions are invoked to keep the natives down. In perhaps the most deft movement in a narrative of understatement, the metaphor of the castration complex is revealed as exactly that: a metaphor, and one that can be changed to suit a different ideology: "Psychological articles began to appear in the magazines on the origin of women's kitchen envy and how it could be cured." Masculinity is now not measured by the size of one's car but the length and sharpness of one's *tool*: the new status symbol has a far more violent connotation than the rather

humorous previous one. The shift in emphasis, however, introduces *the cutting edge* of a logic much more obviously phallic in nature. The concluding image only reinforces the ideological equation of God and Man as the formerly mundane aspects of daily existence are ritualised and sanctified. The disruption of this masculine religion is signalled by the plethora of feminine whispering and a hint of unconscious interpolation in the public masculine text (in the form of the women's subversive dreams). Official history is re-interpreted as the Fall is evoked in a concluding liberatory gesture. The disturbing unshakeability of binary structures of dominance that Atwood identifies in even a New Age masculine economy surely bears out Derrida's advocacy of the deconstructive endeavour as a continuing process:

To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. . . . It is not a question of a chronological phase, a given moment, or a page that one day simply will be turned, in order to go on to other things. The necessity of this phase is structural; it is the necessity of an interminable analysis: the hierarchy of dual oppositions always re-establishes itself. (*Positions*, 41-2)

"Simmering" is both a condensation of and a forerunner to the thematic concerns of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Not only does it present a recognisable present in dystopian disguise, but also it documents the transubstantiation of the masculine word into a fearful corporeality. The republic of Gilead is the exemplification of the patriarchal word incarnate; a regime that operates according to enforced binary oppositions.<sup>8</sup> A selective reading of the Bible provides the sanction for institutionalised oppression. Of course, it is the feminine that bears the mark of this religious lash. Women are defined in either sexual or economic terms. Denied individual specificity, they are segregated and confined by functional, homogenising categories: Econowives, Aunts, Marthas, Wives. Such categorical constructions reflect an ideology of the Same since women are defined only in relation to men. As a handmaid, Offred is constructed in the Gileadean economy entirely in terms of her sex: "the colour of blood, which defines us" (18). Hers is the experience of the speaker in *Power Politics* who is coloured in by her Bluebeard-like partner:

You will not listen  
to resistances, you cover me  
  
with flags, a dark red  
season, you delete from me  
all other colours  
("Hesitations Outside the Door" *SP*, 170)

This Oedipal emphasis on physicality fosters the complete negation of subjectivity, a denial that is reinforced by the subsumation of individual names under a patronymic identity. Figurative rape is accompanied by its literal counterpart. Servitude is sold to the

chosen vessels by Aunts whose names mirror those of lines of cosmetics. Politics and gender are intertwined as strict sexual delimitation is imposed. Lesbianism (typically) is ignored and homosexuality is a capital offence: in a society devoted to black and white demarcation no ambiguity is tolerated. A fundamental paradox resides in the privileging of sex but the total suppression of sexuality. As Dorothy Jones notes, the Madonna/whore dichotomy is imposed upon the "blank" female subject: "Male attempts to possess, enjoy and control [female sexuality] are summed up in the paradox of scarlet women dressed and cloistered as nuns" ("Not Much Balm in Gilead", 32). One of the Commander's conversations with Offred seems like a reiteration of the brain-washed attitudes the Aunts attempt to impose. (Only later is the possibility raised that he may have orchestrated this ideological imposition). Discussing the new state-defined roles for women, the Commander refers to them as "they" -- the archetypal Other -- and claims that women can now fulfil their "biological destinies" (231). In what seems to be a valorising of the maternal capacity an underlying prejudice can be discerned. The rigidity of the controls imposed on women is less concrete as it applies to men, and again the natural equation is appealed to as a justification for a seeming contradiction. The Commander unconcernedly explains away the existence of whore-houses like Jezebels by claiming that "Nature demands variety for men" (249). Whether selective religiosity or "biological determinism", the rationales spell disaster for the feminine.

Considering the oculocentric definition of the handmaids, it is hardly surprising that in the Gileadean economy vision and knowledge are powerfully combined. Like the ubiquity of Big Brother in Orwell's *1984*, citizens are controlled by the constant threatening surveillance by the Eyes. These Secret Police encapsulate the visored vision of a masculine economy since their mirror-windowed vans and dark-glass clad visages allow them to see without being seen: Bentham's panoptic vision made flesh. It is ironically appropriate that their central base is the university, a former site of openness and learning. Now the library has become a temple devoted to oppression (175). Since sight and knowledge are the means to power, they are by definition denied the powerless. Women are kept symbolically and intellectually in the dark. Their vision is *veiled* just as Offred's sight is curtailed by the blinkers of the nun-like wings that she is forced to wear. This masculine blindness is of the order of erasure. The chosen absence from a public text that Offred once believed offered freedom is now an imposed erasure offering only imprisonment and a lack of agency. Later in the novel Offred identifies herself as "a blank here, between parentheses. Between other people" (240). The negative sign that denotes the feminine has resulted in her neat excision from the printed page, from her daughter's life and from history. She is the blank space in the Gileadean text. The handmaids are merely the means to a patriarchal end, the feminine rock on which the



Gileadean religion is founded. In both the public Ceremony and the equally public Birthings, the rituals are ones in which the handmaid's are figuratively executed.

The de-maternalisation of the relation of mother and child that the principle of surrogacy effects is initiated by the handmaids' re-education at the Red Centre. Forced to refer to their captors as "aunt", the women are infantilised. As their subsequent treatment shows, it is a state in which they are to remain. What more effective means of control than the enforced condition of child-like dependency? Denied the word, and more importantly, denied a mirror image of themselves, these women are prohibited from entering the symbolic order in an orchestrated attempt to enslave them. To enter the symbolic is to attain subjectivity and the ability to constitute oneself in language. Both subjectivity and self-definition are prevented by this economy. This Imaginary imprisonment assumes a subversive twist if the metaphor is replaced by a semiotic alignment. Certainly, the most resounding guerilla warfare in the novel is constituted *in* language, but semiotic rupturings of the regimented Gileadean order *are* signalled by the *activities* of the handmaids: a non-linguistic communication of movement and gesture. So, when Offred catches the eye of a Guardian she relishes the defiance of their act: "Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes" (31). Temporarily, the homogenous wall of stated control is holed by a feminine gesture. In a similar fashion, Offred visits her Commander, intrigued and hopeful of the possibility of escape: "To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is that entices me. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his. I may be able to see my way clear" (146). The wall that is erected is the barrier of a phallogocentric economy, the assumed armour of an egocentric mythology. The structural fault that Offred identifies is possibly a crack in the "armour of the alienating identity" (Lacan, 4), one that reduces the phallogocentric "I" to its proper dimensions.

Yet the religious binary rationale that drives this economy is presented as incontrovertible logic and the only reasonable way. (The epigraph from Swift's "A Modest Proposal" plays an ironic, deconstructive role here). The discourse, however, is not a dialogic one but rather a masculine monologue. The story that Gilead offers is *his* story and it is suffused with all the presuppositions that govern that narrative. The feminist historiography that Offred's narrative represents is in striking contrast to the official masculine Truth evinced by Gilead's engineers and the dubious Professor Pieixoto who presides over the "Historical Notes" that conclude the novel. This satiric epigraph is proffered in a deconstructive gesture reminiscent of a biblical adage notably absent from Gilead's text: "By their own words shall ye know them." Like the rest of the novel this is set in the future but has a parabolic relation to contemporary attitudes and events. A paradox is highlighted from the very first: after the experience of the novel Pieixoto tells his audience/us that the story may not be real. The reaction is of course in

the affirmative, and we find ourselves defending fiction against accusations of fabrication. Thus, the usual notions of Truth and History are undermined. As Hayden White has pointed out, historical narrative is subject to the same processes of emplotment as so-called fictional narrative, and therefore the same prejudices are involved in selection and rejection. History is no more "truthful" than fiction. Everything is text; there is no one *Truth* but rather, a multitude of *truths*. The lines between empirical history and imaginative fiction are exploded as we are coerced into denying the former and affirming the latter. Indeed, the notes provide a totally ironic comment on traditional (phallogocentric) historians and historiography.

In the supposedly more civilised future, the same binary prejudices and sexism that pervaded Gileadean society can be discerned. The keyword in the keynote speaker's title is *authentication*: the masculine need to pin down and verify. Pieixoto's address is devoted to finding the Truth but his priorities of historical significance are as recognisably masculinist and conservative as those of contemporary historians and pervaded by the same claims of objectivity: the conference is held at the University of Denay, Nunavit -- Deny None of It -- yet the opposite is exactly what is occurring:

History as that body of knowledge dealing with the truth of facts rests on the presence it creates, a presence which relies on absence. It is a presence of linearity and sameness which feeds itself on the continuous erasure of the contradictions undoing its patterns of logic and truth. For we can talk about linear history only in the singular. History presents a monologic rendering of events because it invests its course with the order of the same: it speaks with the authority of the Name-of-the-Father; it disperses difference; it disseminates sameness. (Kamboureli, 31)

Names of the participants imply that little has changed in the way of stereotypes: *Maryann Crescent Moon* implies that women are still defined in biological terms. "The Handmaid's Tale" is an imposition of the historians rather than Offred herself and it is based on a master narrative not a woman's classic. Naming and slanted sexual innuendo are, it would seem, still a masculine prerogative: "I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar significance of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the *bone* as it were, of contention" (313, my emphasis). The superiority Pieixoto assumes belies the similarity of his attitude (and that of his audience) to the sexist attitudes on which Gilead was founded. The shape of the novel, we discover, is not Offred's but the historians'. The veiled complaint about the difficulties of organising her narrative reveals the historical tendency to organise narrative in a linear, temporal fashion. Pieixoto's implicit exasperation with Offred's history and historiography only reinforces his obvious deafness to her story. It is a fitting example of Cixous' observations of feminine speech: "for even if she transgresses [silence], her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (LM, 251). Oral narratives are still regarded with

suspicion for they do not bear the official stamp of institutions or impersonal documentation; the professor is even reluctant to accord the tapes the dubious honorific title of *document*. The laughter that punctuates his speech only highlights the vulgarity of his (and their) attitude and goads him into further sexist self-exposure. The so-called objective stance of the historians merely absolves them from responsibility and involvement: "in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand" (314-5). There is precious little active comprehension occurring here, however. Indeed, the tacit approval with which he describes the engineering of Gileadean society -- "It was a brilliant stroke" (321) -- implies moral approbation rather than disinterested examination. In his opinion, Offred has proffered the wrong information. Her personal account is no doubt interesting but ultimately useless in the face of information she could have gathered if she had "the instincts of a reporter or a spy". His contempt is implicit in his concluding statement: "However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us" (322). Women can be the symbols of truth as long as real women are denied both the access to that truth and the validity of their own truths. Offred is not accorded that particular privilege as Pieixoto carefully avoids any sense of her reality. History is written by the winners. This history is written by a victim and is therefore automatically less valid, *and almost improper*. History is the power that masks its own desire for, as Pieixoto shows, history can never be impersonal, objective and apolitical. This is feminist history: oral, fragmented and visceral. The historical notes do shed some light that Offred could not, in giving information concerning the possible identity of her Commander and drawing paradigmatic parallels between Gileadean society and our own. What at first appears to be a rather lame conclusion, however, actually provides the last ironic twist and illuminating comment on a narrative that warns us more about contemporary society than it draws a picture of a horrifying distant dystopian future. Whilst Pieixoto no doubt does not expect a rebellious challenge to the logic that underpins his discussion, the course of Offred's narrative makes it clear that Atwood *does*.

Binary oppositions are unilaterally un-rhizomatic. According to Deleuze and Guattari, binary logic is "the intellectual reality" of the outmoded textual "root-tree" (*OTL*, 6). Atwood's rhizomatics undermine the stability of this root fixity. Hers is a deconstructive gesture; she uses these polarities to startling subversive effect, but she also exposes them as theoretical fictions. Thus, whilst one strategy is that of ironically reversing this "inherent" masculine superiority, she is most assuredly not suggesting the replacement of a patriarchal society with a social order more matriarchal in nature:

Would a matriarchal theology exalt women and give men a secondary place? If so, I'm not interested because it would be the same problem

in reverse. It wouldn't interest me to have all the priests be women and all the altar boys be men. I'd prefer an egalitarian or human religion.  
(Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", 116)

Part of *her* strategy is to interrupt a complacent feminist reversal of a polar equation. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's oppressed condition is merely a masculinised version of her mother's earlier assertion; an assertion that ironically rhizomes throughout the text: "A man is just a woman's strategy for making another woman" (130-1). Atwood *is* a feminist, but her feminism is not that of an exclusively woman-centered ideology. Such uncompromising positionality is, for her, as dangerous as the empowered position it seeks to replace. Therefore, after the Birthing Ceremony in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred exposes the oppositional nature of her mother's ideology in a silent inward address: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (137). Black irony. Offred's memories reflect the fact that oppositional inflexibility -- no matter how liberatory in aspiration -- can have frightening results.

Atwood, therefore, does not present an easy (feminist) out; she does not place the blame for the perpetuation of conflictual oppositions squarely on masculine shoulders. Elaine Risley's experience in *Cat's Eye* is a resounding example of the possibility of victimisation by feminine oppressors. Similarly, Anna and David's relationship in *Surfacing* shows the detrimental effects of a life of opposition -- living death: "I remembered what Anna had said about emotional commitments; they've made one, I thought, they hate each other; that must be almost as absorbing as love" (138). It is a masochistic relationship in which they both participate, but it is one, I believe, in which Anna fares the worst. Theirs is the experience of the partners in *Power Politics*. Here, the feminine narrator recognises her own complicity in the construction of a mythological masculine monster (SP, 167; 174). But she also recognises the need to transcend those same, mechanistic hostilities:

Put down the target of me  
you guard inside your binoculars,  
in turn I will surrender

this aerial photograph  
(your vulnerable  
sections marked in red)  
I have found so useful  
(1971: "They Are Hostile Nations", SP, 161-2)

What is required, according to her, is progression *together*. It is significant that the poem that concludes the selection containing *Power Politics* and "Circe/Mud Poems" is "Book of Ancestors" (1974: SP, 238-40). Like "Hand" (MD, 59), this poem offers the possibility of transcending binary oppositions through a re-connection with the corporeality that warfare armours over. To make the attempt is risky -- something "we /

tried but could never do / before. without blood" -- but it offers the possibility of selfless completion.

Atwood never suggests that getting "beyond the phallus" is unproblematic. As Shoshona Felman so convincingly argues, the binary oppositions of phallogocentrism may be derided or embraced, but they can never be summarily avoided (4). Thus, Atwood's is a pragmatic *and* utopian vision; a battle, if you will, on two fronts. She acknowledges the pervasiveness of polar dialectics but also recognises the need for other possibilities: "Again I think people see two alternatives. You can be part of the machine or you can be something that gets run over by it. *And I think there has to be a third thing*" (Gibson, 31, my emphasis). In deconstructionist fashion, Atwood pricks the inflated logic of masculine phantasy into deflated proportion. Hers is the position of "the questioning *subject*"; one who interrogates the logic of hierarchised oppositions and the itinerary of the masculine desire that produces and sustains it (Spivak, 186). Whilst she uses the polarities of this logos, it is only to effect their ironic re-contextualisation and reversal; to expose the discursive "assumption" that is in fact "presumption", "fraud" (Gallop, 122). Her infidelity is also Felman's solution to an unavoidably binary logic; "to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning" (10). As Derrida says, a deconstructive project is "the necessity of an interminable analysis" (*Positions*, 42). Thus, for Atwood, kicking against the pricks is an ongoing adventure.

NOTES

- 1 Many academics do not consider Derrida and Foucault as philosophers or historians at all. Their activities brand them as the *enfants terrible* of the epistemological fields they occupy. In this university, Derrida goes unstudied in the Department of Philosophy and the Department of History refers to Foucault as an "anti-historian".
- 2 Atwood uses "Circe/Mud Poems" (1974: *SP*, 201-23) to this subversive effect. In the psychoanalytic realm, the best example of this is Cixous' and Irigaray's critique of master narratives on their own terms even as those very discourses constitute their (women's) absence.
- 3 The swathed feminine body and featureless visored knight challenges not only the courtly tradition but is also a pre-echo of contemporary sexual relations as portrayed in *Bodily Harm*.
- 4 Jocasta's conversation makes an interesting comparison with the narrator's remarks in *Surfacing*: "Prove your love, they say. You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory, some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head" (87).
- 5 Similarly, Lacan's devotions are those of a wolf in sheep's clothing (a *lycanthrope*?) Lacan locates women's *jouissance* in a stone statue. Although Lacan may beg women on his knees to tell him what we want, it is little wonder that he receives no reply. If you are frozen in stone, it is impossible to speak, let alone be heard.
- 6 This image of castration is a pre-echo of the *doctoring* accorded cats (and women) in *Bodily Harm*.
- 7 Lauter also notes this repetitious, mechanistic way of seeing (65).
- 8 The self-righteous morality that underpins this totalitarian state is deconstructed by its very name. In Jeremiah 9:2-3, the people of Gilead are described as "adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men."

## **THE THREAD OF DESIRE**

**Meditations  
for a Savage Child**

*(The prose passages are from J-M Itard's  
account of The Wild Boy of Aveyron, as  
translated by G. and M. Humphrey)*

I

*There was a profound indifference to the objects of our pleasures and of our fictitious needs; there was still . . . so intense a passion for the freedom of the fields . . . that he would certainly have escaped into the forest had not the most rigid precautions been taken . . .*

In their own way, by their own lights  
they tried to care for you  
tried to teach you to care  
for objects of their caring:

glossed oak planks, glass  
whirled in a fire  
to impossible thinness

to teach you names  
for things  
you did not need

muslin shirred against the sun  
linen on a sack of feathers  
locks, keys  
boxes with coins inside

they tried to make you feel  
the importance of

a piece of cowhide  
sewn around a bundle  
of leaves impressed with signs

to teach you language:  
the thread their lives  
were strung on

Adrienne Rich, *Diving Into The Wreck*, 55-6.



She's a wild child  
And nobody can get at her  
She's a wild child  
And nobody can get to her.

Lou Reed, "Wild Child", *Transformer*.



Adrienne Rich's dramatic re-enactment of the conflictual demands on the subject of language and desire contextualises the rendezvous in this chapter between similarly uneasy bedfellows: Atwood, psychoanalysis, and feminism. The meeting should not be viewed as the precursor to a blissful union but rather, like all points of intersection, as a site of inevitable tension(s). Although the parties of this *ménage à trois* may seem unconnected, a common thread binds them in the same thematic arena: a preoccupation with the subject's relation to language (and the Law that is associated with it), and with licit and illicit pleasures. As "Meditations for a Savage Child" suggests, and Atwood's and Kristeva's texts reinforce, the passions of a wild child -- perhaps a woman? -- disturb the tenuous cohesion of a certain form of social order.

Although Lacan, and Kristeva after him, rewrites Freud's founding id / ego / superego topology, all agree that the unconscious is the site of repressed sexual drives and libidinal energies (most notably the desire for union with the mother -- a desire that the social contract outlaws). Yet the very premise on which the psychoanalytic adventure is based is that the unconscious is irrepressible and cathects its libidinal investments in a series of condensations and displacements that bypass the censorship of socio-symbolic prohibition. Like a bad joke (or in terms of Lacan's *l'hommelette*: a bad yolk), the unconscious always returns. Whilst Lacan's mirror stage and Oedipus complex cast the Imaginary as an always already retrospective construction, Kristeva's rewriting of thethetic as a traversable boundary between the semiotic (Imaginary) and Symbolic gives the sexual, subversive drives of the unconscious an added anarchic twist. Adopting Lacan's identification of the child's entry into language as governed by *le non du père / le nom du père*, she turns his *sujet d'un procès* into *le sujet en procès*. Kristeva envisages the semiotic/symbolic exchange as a continuous dialectic operating in all social relations. Symbolic dominance is never secure but is continually challenged by the forces of the semiotic. Although Kristeva herself never makes an explicit *equation* between the semiotic and femininity the implications are hard to ignore:

[There is] no reference point in the unconscious . . . No now, no before, no after. No true or false either. It [*ça*] displaces, condenses, distributes. It retains everything repressed by the word: by sign, by sense, by communication, by the symbolic order, in whatever is legislating, paternal and restrictive. . . . woman is a specialist in the unconscious.

("About Chinese Women", 153-4)

In the light of Lacan's infamous assertion that the unconscious is the discourse of the other, then the existence of an "order" different from the paternally regulated system of denotation and permissible desire is raised.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the subversive force that this discourse represents is indicated in "Simmering" (*MD*, 31-3), where Atwood posits the possibility that feminine desire and masculine desire may not be synonymous. Here, the pleasures of the male-dominated culinary "adventure" are achieved through death and dismemberment, activities that establish the symbolic reign of the carving knife. In contrast, the women's "clandestine" dreams hint at different kinds of creativity. The unconscious eruption of both sexual and maternal pleasures contributes to a discourse that the chef/chiefs are at pains to suppress:

They dream of plunging their hands into the earth, which is red as blood and soft, which is milky and warm. They dream that the earth gathers itself under their hands, swells, changes its form, flowers into a thousand shapes, for them too, for them once more.

Although the pronouns in "The Page" are ungendered, the text's layered connotations evoke a subversive femininity in the face of the questionable (masculine) authority of those who wield the pen/knife (*MD*, 44-5). The page appears to possess all the attributes of regulation femininity: the innocent white emptiness of a screen awaiting projection and the enticing pool that proffers only reassuring reflections. Even the initial reported warnings can be read as a veiled reference to the pleasurable effects of feminine charms: "those who stare at the page for long go blind." But like the mirror in "Tricks with Mirrors" (1974: *SP*, 183-6), this blank surface contains hidden depths. It is only "pretending to be blank." Rather than passively presenting a solid surface for the masculine script the page represents a traversable boundary between stability and instability. Marking this "surface" is tantamount to wounding it (castration?), and awakens a dangerous bodily presence: "The page is not a pool but a skin, a skin is there to hold in and it can feel you touching it. Did you really think it would just lie there and do nothing?" Venturing *beneath* the page one enters a dark bodily continent devoid of landmarks of any kind: "The page itself has no dimensions and no directions." The intangibility of this space coupled with the "perils" it presents gives Atwood's feminine page an obviously semiotic (and abject) alignment.

But why should this descent to the underworld constitute an horrific journey for the masculine subject? What is it about its unspecified amorphousness that is so life-threatening? Perhaps because this semiotic force (following that of Freud's unconscious) disrupts the stability of the Cartesian *cogito*, the rock upon which the Western ethos is founded. The unsettling force of the unconscious, like the Derridean notion of *différance*, threatens the coherence of the masculine subject and the masculine text. As forces of desire, *différance* and the unconscious are aspects of subjectivity that a

structured authority, nostalgic for the *cogito*, wants to exclude. Their "negative" anarchic potentiality is signalled by Derrida's "definition" of his explosive term:

. . . *différance* is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by a capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything that within us desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach *différance* with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter.

(Derrida, "*Différance*", 21-2)

Because of the effects of these forces of desire the subject is not a unified entity but is inevitably split (*clivé*).<sup>2</sup> The discursive mastery of the phallogocentric "I" is at best tenuous, and its homogenous dominance is achieved only through the suppression of the heterogenous pleasures of a preceding semiotic dimension:

In agreement with Derrida, Kristeva signals that reason, logic, grammar, syntax, univocal meanings -- the so-called 'higher achievements' of civilisation -- function only because of a sometimes violent repression and sacrifice. The speaking subject must 'pay' for the unity and certainty of its position, its 'mastery', with the renunciation of its maternal pleasures and the sacrifice of its oedipal, incestual attachments. The symbolic is 'erected' only on the basis of repression of the maternal. As Freud argued, what is repressed is the feminine. Its silence is the condition of symbolic stability. Civilisation, the symbolic order, the coherent text, then, are possible only at the cost of the silencing, the phallicisation, of the maternal *chora*.

(Grosz, *SS*, 49)

Whilst silent, the page is certainly not wholly suppressed since, like the maternal *chora* which is the necessary precondition for the Symbolic order, you need a *page* to write on. Its attraction is that of the final frontier to the conquering adventurer. Entering this realm these heroes experience the "full horror" of an other order and "most never make it out at all." Those who enter the page unintentionally, however, (and presumably with no thought of violence) return unscathed. What is menacing for some is obviously not disconcerting for others. When the repressed feminine returns -- Cixous calls it "an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return" (LM, 256) -- it is perhaps only terrifying to those with a stake in symbolic dominance. The destabilisation of this order challenges unity, identity, and the rule of paternal Law.

The challenge that Kristevan theory presents to the Lacanian Symbolic Law of the Father is not immediately apparent. Her topology draws upon Freudian, Lacanian and Derridean concepts: (her definition of the semiotic includes "the trace" and a "fuzziness" to meaning [DL,133].) The semiotic, like Lacan's Imaginary, precedes subjectivity, meaning and signification, involves the formless circulation of anarchic desires, and is

linked with the bodily contact with the mother in a relationship that is both dual and immediate. The similarity extends to her recognition of the necessity of the child's entry into the symbolic order of language. Kristeva, however, redefines the inevitability of Imaginary abandonment. If the socio-symbolic contract is, for Kristeva, a sacrificial contract, then her notion of the *sujet en procès* lessens its magnitude. Her ideal subject (and text) is one who allows the *jouissance* of semiotic motility to disrupt the regimented code of the symbolic order. The alternating subject then, oscillates between maternal and paternal modalities, between illicit and licit desires. But the power and authority of the Father's Law is founded on the suppression of the (m)other. Even in the familial Oedipal triangle that forms the basis of the psychoanalytic master narratives the triadic structuring principle is masked into a dyad. The maternal is repressed and the resulting topology is a (patri)linear one: the name of the Father. Offred's experience in *The Handmaid's Tale* is testimony to this erasure. Not only does she bear the patronymic but also she is forcibly removed from her child's compass.

The Symbolic order may proclaim the unified reality of the "root-tree" but it is always already marked by an indebtedness to a prior relationship (*OTL*, 6). Like the unconscious, the maternal can never be fully suppressed; the fully present self is always already marked by the absent fragmented self. If the austere Law that the Symbolic imposes allows only certain kinds of pleasure and represses all others then Kristeva's semiotic reintroduces the immediate gratification of pre-Oedipal desires, shattering the conservative system where desire is never gratified but ranges in a constant search for an illusory plenitude. That such carnivalesque behaviour should be outlawed and policed by the "sex cops" of the signifier is testimony to its anarchic effect (Cixous, *LM*, 247). Herein lies the revolutionary potential of the feminine:

The woman's mark lies precisely in this marginality, but it is a marginality internal to the system, integrated in it, indispensable. Her truth lies in her oblique position *vis à vis* the symbolic, in the subversion whose process/trial she assures. She is the force of rejection which "displaces" the symbolic order and shatters it *each* time it reconstitutes itself. She is the force of renewal in society since she identifies with rejection, with the negativity that takes over the process/trial of the subject, and through it, of society. She is the guarantor of the heterogeneity which dislocates unity and of the pleasure that accompanies it.

(Féral, "Antigone or The Irony of The Tribe", 10-11)

Freud and Lacan appropriate the Oedipal topology as integral to the constitution of the subjects yet they turn the most important component of that metaphor into a peripheral entity. Accordingly, the feminine constitutes the particular blindness that allows the supremacy of the paternal Law. Kristeva returns the maternal to its rightful place in the topology and reintroduces pleasures outside its compass.<sup>3</sup> (The bodily connotations of this polyvalent "woman-effect" evoke Irigaray's descriptions of feminine *jouissance*: a

pleasure that is multiple, diverse, de-centered. [SØ] Unrestricted to one organ or site, this *jouissance* incorporates the pleasures of fragmentary excess. Most importantly, this *jouissance*, like the semiotic, is outside the symbolic system of representation and desire. Both represent an infidelity to paternal strictures, and a force that challenges assumed phallic hegemony.) The Symbolic is deconstructed every time the semiotic ruptures its unitary surface; what is present is disrupted, destabilised by the absence on which it is founded.

This disruptive turn is one that is embodied in this discussion. My initial conception of this chapter as the sum of two parts was itself called into question by the texts I seek to elucidate. It seemed to me, that the subject could only be dealt with in discrete textual segments: that of the semiotic (in relation to language) and that of the body (desire). Not only does the rhizomatic complexity of Atwood's textual corpus resist such systematic categorisation, but also the very constitution of the feminist psychoanalytic model deconstructs the hierarchical dualism upon which such identifications (and identities) are based. If the order of language and identity is subverted by a repressed bodily presence, then any such discussion of it should surely embody this effect. Desire *in* language. Therefore, whilst this chapter contains a discernible theoretical *clivage*, the body is not confined by this administrative, organisational boundary but strategically resurfaces throughout the text. Atwood's textual body is irrepressible.

But civilisation functions according to the repressive hypothesis. (Social) order has its price and in Atwood's texts it is the feminine, and/or the feminine body of the landscape, that pays. "The Settlers" (1966: *SP*, 45-6) introduces the notion of colonial capture and an originary fluidity that is bounded. Their victory involves only a "quick skirmish", the harm inflicted only a mere (bodily) "twinge". In a parenthetical aside, however, the speaker drily informs us that the fluidity thus "conquered" is merely the result of an imaginary capture:

(of course there was really  
no shore: the water turned  
to land by having  
objects in it: caught and kept  
from surge, made  
less than immense  
by networks of  
roads and grids of fences)

Notwithstanding, the remark does recall Lacan's assertion that the world of words creates the world of things. But the order of this particular discourse is a confining one since its imposition upon a corporeal void evokes the bars of a correctional institution.

As a consequence of this theoretical capture, the subject in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" is overtaken by an unintended form of mental seizure (1968: *SP*, 60-3).

Again, cartography provides Atwood with a strong metaphor with which to comment on masculine preoccupations. Attempting to conquer the (feminine) void with the fixed map of civilisation, the pioneer only succeeds in imprisoning himself. His egocentrism in "proclaiming himself the centre" still does not confer on him the expected power of nomenclature. The discourse of swamp and rock, weed and tree-sprout constitutes a language he cannot (or will not?) begin to understand. The spurious authority of *his* order is the same as that so subtly undercut by Adrienne Rich: an order symbolised by the profundity accorded "a piece of cowhide / sewn around a bundle / of leaves impressed with signs" (56). Whilst Susanna Moodie acknowledges that she is merely "a word / in a foreign language" and plants her flag in the form of her dead son ( a bodily gift that allows her to land<sup>4</sup>), this coloniser is implicitly driven mad by the impenetrability of an unknown land. Indeed, in this case it is the pioneer who is overwhelmed: "everything / is getting in." This bodily territory is perceived as a void, a chaos of nothingness, whose very lack represents an all-encompassing threat:

This is not order  
but the absence  
of order.

He was wrong the unanswering  
forest implied:

It was  
an ordered absence

Fear and resistance go hand in hand. Refusing to acknowledge the existence of an order *other* than his own, the pioneer resists the possibility of fluid, unbounded semiotic space. But the body of the land has another agenda:

But obstinate he  
stated, the land is solid  
and stamped,

watching his foot sink  
down through stone  
up to the knee.

Implicitly, the pioneer's fear is due to the loss of stable identity that such an invasion would engender, hence his misdirected efforts to preserve the requisite distinction between self and other, "subject and object". *This* land, however, refuses to be pinned down and dominated, and finally it is the pioneer who is metaphorically raped of his intellectual faculties. One of the possible definitions of "progressive" implies that the "insanity" need not necessarily be harmful nor reductive.

In a movement akin to that of the return of repressed desires, the invaded territory strikes back. The point is frequently made that order is something we impose on the

fragmented body of nature in a negotiatory gesture of comprehension, an attempt to structure it into intelligibility. In this manner the chaos of brute reality is tamed. But this vision has an exclusive rather than inclusive tendency:

. . . If they let go  
of that illusion solid to them as a shovel,  
  
open their eyes even for a moment  
to these trees, to this particular sun  
they would be surrounded, stormed, broken  
  
in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark  
side of light  
as I am.  
("The Planters", 1970: *SP*, 84)

In contrast, Susanna Moodie is surrounded by the dark side of light, the other side of reason, the chaos that reason seeks -- desperately it seems -- to dispel. This body ruptures the ordered system that has been imposed, forcefully inscribing the absence on which presence has been erected. Drawing upon the immensity of the natural environs, and the puniness of humans and human activities in relation to it, Moodie evokes a power greater than the one that the planters -- men -- wield. Theirs is the implement of civilisation and progress: the shovel with which they scratch orderly rows on the "jagged" surface of the earth. Weeding the rows, they maintain the tenuous stability of their "patch" of "future". Moodie's vision, however, consists of the disorderliness of natural profusion; hers are the rhizomatic "branches", "roots" and "tendrils" of an unbordered *other* system. Significantly, it is only *she* who submits to another way of seeing, one that the planters, with their closed eyes, refuse to acknowledge.

"Fishing for Eel Totems" also explores the pre-signifying energy of a semiotic dimension (1970b: *SP*, 137). Like Moodie, this speaker is also attuned to the "signals" that arise from an underworld. Mistakenly, s/he believes that this other-worldly creature has no language outside its watery habitat. Certainly, once sacrificed it is a "grey tongue hanged silent in the smokehouse". But penetrating the "blue barrier" that separates their respective spaces the fish communicates in the fluid language of the body. The knowledge thus imparted enables the speaker to identify a preceding language, one that is non-linear, non-syntactical, unfettered, amorphous, "liquid". The "fluid silver" of this bodily revelation is in stark contrast to the social strictures of "our syntax of chained pebbles". Since attempting to contain water with a chain is an impossible task, perhaps the strength of this later linguistic system is as tenuous as that of the wild child's captors: "language: / the thread their lives / were strung on" (Rich, 56).

This child's "profound indifference" to the priorities of an alien order echoes that of the enigmatic Duncan in *The Edible Woman*. In Marian's first encounter with him, Duncan upsets the systematicity of her questionnaire, first by proffering an unanalysable



string of poetic associations and finally by refusing to complete the interview because "the rest of it sound[s] like a drag" (55). In contrast to Peter's considered maturity, Duncan's appearance and behaviour is repeatedly described in child-like terms. His immaturity and self-confessed amoebic identity (201), recalls the primordial form of the Lacanian *l'hommelette*: the polymorphous perversity and fragmented body-image of the pre-Oedipal child before it takes up its place in the authoritative structures of the symbolic order. Thus, Marian (who has undergone the requisite sacrificial entry to this order) is slightly disturbed by the effects of Duncan's "rather liquid confessing": "It seemed rather foolhardy to me, like an uncooked egg deciding to come out of its shell; there would be a risk of spreading out too far, turning into a formless puddle" (99). (As yet, Marian is only vaguely aware that the system of Peter's specular representations is reducing *her* to a formless puddle.) Indeed, Duncan appears to engage in a series of semiotic-aligned activities. In a gesture tantamount to refusing the mirror stage, Duncan smashes the voracious "public" glass in his bathroom in favour of "[his] own private mirror. One [he] can trust" (140). The more bizarre aspects of Duncan's preoccupations and pronouncements (and of course, his relationship with Marian) place him in direct opposition to the meticulous, professionalised structure of Peter's way of life. It is no coincidence that Peter is a lawyer. Having no direct contact with Peter, Duncan is unaffected by his Law: (Peter, it should be remembered, believes children should be brought up within strict disciplinary boundaries [147]). As the most "semiotic" figure in the novel, Duncan is textual testimony to Kristeva's cautionary note that this modality is as open to masculine subjects as it is to feminine ones.

One of the first things that Duncan tells Marian is that the signifying function of language is beginning to come unhinged: "'Words, . . . are beginning to lose their meanings'" (96). His effect on the order of language seems to be similarly degenerative. Contemplating Duncan's unfinished questionnaire, Marian finds that "the notes I had made of his answers were almost indecipherable in the glare of the sunlight; all I could see on the page was a blur of grey scribbling" (55). Often, their relationship proceeds by means of unspoken -- intuitive, instinctive -- communication and ambiguous, archaic symbols: "She found a little pile of white shells. They were like some primitive signal, a heap of rocks or a sign made with sticks or notches cut in trees . . . (126). Clearly, Duncan belongs primarily to a pre-linguistic realm.

The amorphous nature of Duncan's "identity" produces a similar identity crisis in Marian. Her encounters with him provoke a breakdown in symbolic dominance, disruptions to which she is already prone. Duncan's shifting positions in the movie theatre convince her she is an hallucinating madwoman. Her initial minor infidelity with him she regards as merely "a kind of lapse, *a blank in the ego*, like amnesia" (103, my emphasis). Marian's lapses, however, become more frequent, and her faithfulness to

Peter's legalistic order increasingly questionable. Perhaps Duncan is not so much the initiator as the catalyst to Marian's latent infidelity. A confrontation with this repressive paternal authority is certainly something Duncan literally cannot face. Peter poses the same fear as that of Duncan's mirror -- the threat of annihilation: "'No no," [Duncan] said, "I can't. It would be a bad thing, I can tell. One of us would be sure to evaporate, it would probably be me . . . (239).<sup>5</sup> So it is Marian who challenges the pretensions of his authority with the subversive corporeal offering of her edible woman. Marian has obviously learned something from her brush with "madness" since the discourse she offers Peter is a wordless one (267). Echoing Marian's earlier flights from his imprisoning specular clutches, this time it is Peter who runs for his life.

It is surprising how little noticed is the strong Oedipal energy which fuels *Surfacing* and, makes it, of all Atwood's novels, the most obvious text for semanalysis.<sup>6</sup> Primarily seeking her father, the narrator confronts her present and her past, and in the process discovers not only her mother but also, ultimately, herself. Now an adult, she returns to the geography of her childhood and her unfolding analysis of her relationship with her parents identifies them as the possessors of quite different epistemologies: her father's, rational and logical, and her mother's, instinctual and communicative.<sup>7</sup> Even in the absence of her father, the narrator cannot avoid adopting the role of her mother although she deems this somehow "impossible" (52). Trapped behind the logical wall of her father's epistemology she cannot comprehend another way. His Reasoned, Cartesian stance is aligned with Symbolic Law and his presumed mastery of self and world is a product of his relation to language. In her father's universe language confers power, allowing Nature to be labelled and quantified. For him "everything had to be measured" (104), and language is merely another mathematical, analytical instrument for empirical definition and closure. The power to name is power over whatever is named; her father's "way" is the subject/object dialectic of phallogocentrism:

Language is one of the tools we use to achieve this mastery: we set ourselves, the perceiving subjects, apart from nature, the perceived object. The Cartesian logic of our language dictates, not only a split between subject and object, but the superior position of the subject -- nature, in other words, is *acted upon*, it is our colony. Atwood's persona is intuitively seeking another code of language, another kind of vision.  
(Sullivan, 36)

Therefore, in the mind of the protagonist, her father's epistemology is implicated in many of the negative things she identifies in the course of her narrative: invasion, mechanistic consumerism, inauthenticity, imprisoning codification, murder -- a civilisation somehow wrongly evolved. In contrast, her mother's relation to nature is instinctual and her relationship with language is much more provisional. Unarmed, she turns away a bear by gesticulating and yelling something 'that *sounded like* "Scat!"', an act that the narrator

refers to as the talismanic combination of "gesture and word" (79, my emphasis).<sup>8</sup> Her mother brings to language what the Symbolic suppresses: corporeal expression and a "fuzziness" to meaning (Kristeva, *DL*, 135). Therefore, when the narrator comes to reap the gifts that her parents have to bestow she says that "his was complicated, tangled, but hers would be *as simple as a hand*" (my emphasis, 149). The impetus of the protagonist's voyage of self-discovery involves the necessity of a more equal redistribution of her parental allegiances.

And it is the narrator's very allegiance to her father's law -- her submission to the Symbolic -- that has effected her head/body division and the experience that has so traumatised her. Although she is intuitively aware that somewhere in her childhood something went dreadfully wrong, her full comprehension of the significance of her submission to a system in which "order is made with knives" (186) arrives only when the repressions it imposes have been wholly cast away. In the all too appropriate context of the invasion of the body-snatchers she identifies the fundamental part language has to play in the construction of identity: "a language is everything you do" (129). Accepting the "benefits" of this civilised contract she discovers a language unutterably alien to her (106); a language in which "love" signifies not the free exchange of desire but the currency of exploitation (47; 87). And of course the language is not hers. Assuming the "I" of language is to assume an identity that is male. For the feminine subject, therefore, the assumption of this "unitary" identity in order to speak is not just the doubled alienation that Lacan identified, but, in fact, a *trebled* alienation. David is the contemporary epitome of this linguistic alienation, this inauthentic language. His "identity" is a mask of repetitive borrowings of others words: inane jokes, political mouthings, comic routines and cartoon imitations of animals solicited for human ridicule.<sup>9</sup> As the narrator subsequently notes, he is merely an imitation, "a pastiche" of "second-hand American" (152). She refuses to respond to, or participate in, his language and his sexual war. Thus, descending into "madness", her claim that "language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (146), signals a recognition that this symbolic imposition is a violent and (for women) dismembering one:

She cannot assume this identity with the Father except by denying her difference as a woman, except by repressing the maternal within her -- and she is impelled to do this by society, a society which, moreover, constitutes itself only through its repression of the mother. For the young girl, it will never be possible to move beyond the Oedipal complex as an attachment to the mother, since she is a woman by her physiological constitution and will never be able to repress completely the mother, except by repressing her own self.  
(Féral, "Antigone or The Irony of the Tribe", 4)

Yet it is this very identification that has wrought such havoc with her. Her "husband" emerges as a father figure who has done her great wrong. A teacher, he continues this role in their relationship, teaching her lettering and marking her drawings. As her sexual

tutor, she idolises him. Faced with her pregnancy, his de-personalised professionalism prevails in his "reasoned" desire for an abortion: "He said I should do it, he made me do it: he talked about it as though it was *legal*, simple, like getting a wart removed" (144, my emphasis). Such is the endpoint of the Father's reason, the Father's Law -- self-betrayal and murder. Fighting fire with fire the narrator buries this experience under layers of conventional marital narratives, building a protective, repressive wall of logic around an even greater (imposed) repression.

The protagonist's symbolic dive (into her unconscious) releases her from this half-life of psychical and physical paralysis, and signals her movement into an-other realm, an authentic realm of "true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic" (145). *Immersing* herself in "the other language" (158), all signs of the methodical systematicity of her father's code prove fearful, and finally, inimical to her. She progressively abandons the rigidly demarcated paternal code of logic, order and reason and opts for an intuitive, maternal system that is non-linguistic and subject to a different organising principle:

In her experience of mystical translucency, the narrator sees herself as part of an evolutionary continuum, a world of verbs and chemical processes. The barriers between outer and inner worlds dissolve; the gulf between phenomenon and name, thing and thought is closed. This world, like the world of the lake is silent. There are no nouns, no barriers between self and not-self.  
(Sullivan, 38)

Breaking with paternal logic, she dives into the fluid semiotic body of the unconscious. (One is reminded of the pools of "The Page", "This is a Photograph of Me" and "Tricks with Mirrors".) Rejecting language, she also rejects an even earlier phase in the formation of *sub-jectivity*: the mirror stage. In turning the mirror to the wall she is not only repudiating an unnatural object but also the artificial construction of identity that it offers the feminine subject:

... reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. ... I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken.  
(175)

The mirror stage is the first in a series of crucial alienations leading to the abandonment of the maternal pleasures of pre-Oedipal heterogeneity since "the image stands in place of the felt experience" (Grosz, SS, 45). To attain full membership in the symbolic clan the child must give up the felt "me" for the linguistic "I" and the former is suppressed. The "I" of discourse is the impersonal participant in the father's logical order; the "me" that is repressed is the personal subject of the primary pulsions of the maternal *chora*. Exchanging the personal for the impersonal, the child exchanges the felt experience for an illusory experience of totalising identity. Transcending this sacrificial exchange, the narrator reclaims this prior sensation and makes a sacrifice of her own to "the gods" who

allowed it: she burns everything civilised that signifies a girlhood gone wrong. And this in order "to clear a space" (177). The totality of self is broken down as the thetic stage dissolves into transparency, as her self dissolves into the nature that surrounds her. She becomes "transparent" and "everything is made of *water*" (181, my emphasis). When she leans against a tree, she becomes a tree leaning; she becomes eventually a place. Her calm acceptance of this semiotic locus is in stark contrast to the resistant pioneer whose logic is drowned by another system (1966: *SP*, 60-3). Clinging to his constructed boundaries he clings to his equally constructed self. Despising this logic, the narrator freely relinquishes it, and learns to avoid these masculine enclosures since the gods "can move only in the spaces between them, they are against borders" (180). In the eyes of the (Symbolic) world she too becomes mad, psychotic, but in this "madness" truth resides (and a not insignificant amount of pure poetry). "From any rational point of view I am absurd," she says earlier, "but there are no longer any rational points of view" (169). In this silent semiotic world words have no place or significance. Sought by the aggressive (masculine) robots -- the killers -- she flees, but not before she registers the incomprehensibility of their dialogue of vocal staccato and "electronic signals" (185). Only when language has completely left her will the gods complete her vision.<sup>10</sup>

And, appropriately enough, it is the vision of the father that concludes her semiotic experience. Afterwards the narrator affirms the necessity of returning to the "usual way" (189). She acknowledges the necessity of "the intercession of words" (192), the return to the symbolic order; she cannot remain forever in the semiotic world of the pre-Oedipal simply because this is a pre-linguistic world. She has, however, been the willing subject of the semiotic/symbolic exchange and has a changed vision as a result: diving into the semiotic she has emerged whole. (The final vision of her parents also rewrites the tragedy of the Oedipal drama: in her dream her parents are neither desired nor murdered but similarly whole.) The symbolic veil has been rent by the rhythmic movement of a preceding modality but the rupture is not a destructive one -- she sees it as a gift. The return to normal ways is not a rejection of the maternal order but a recognition of the need to communicate with others. There *is* an implicit pessimism in the narrator's first articulation after her experience: it sounds "like something being killed: a mouse, *a bird*?" (190, my emphasis) Since her mother is continually associated with birds, then the narrator's return to the Symbolic has implicitly killed her. But her mother's invaluable gift, however, is signalled by her new resolve: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (191). Her gift, the gift of the semiotic experience, is, as the maternal speaker says in "Solstice Poem" (1978: *SP II*, 37-40), a lesson in a way of being human that will not destroy her. Therefore Sullivan is incorrect in her conclusion that *Surfacing's* protagonist does not escape the confinement of an imprisoning circle game.<sup>11</sup> She returns to the world of the father but in an affirmative rather than a negative fashion: hers is no

longer a submission to the "fact" of her negative (castrated, victimised) status as decreed by paternal law. Submission is no longer the only alternative. Certainly, she identifies the realities this entails: "to immerse oneself, join in the war, or to be destroyed. Though there ought to be other choices" (189). Indeed there should, but such is the narrator's, and I believe, Atwood's, pragmatism. What the narrator has learned is the awareness of the limitations of the symbolic world and that other worlds call the authority of this order into question. In Kristevan terms, this experience, coupled with her new pregnancy, has prepared her for a "permanent calling into question" (Kristeva, qtd in Gallop, 123). Surfacing, the child surfaces with her, a bodily presence that causes her to multiply. (168) Her love is the love for an other that is already within. As Kristeva says: "Pregnancy seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and co-existence of the self and of an other" ("Women's Time", 31). Conceived with Joe, the man whom she can trust "because he is only half-formed" (192), the child offers the possibility of a subjectivity not constituted on a repressive model. Perhaps the child will be neither victim nor victimiser; perhaps the child will be "the first one, the first true human" (191).

If Kristeva locates the semiotic in privileged moments of madness, holiness and poetry then the narrator's experience in *Surfacing* combines all of these privileged instances. During her pre-linguistic immersion the only vocalisation occurs in the irrepressible laughter of the psychotic. Despite all attempts to control it "the laughter extrudes" (184). Like the unconscious, such eruptions are unquellable. As a spontaneous outpouring, Kristeva gives it a semiotic trace:

The semiotic is a distinctive, non-expressive articulation; neither amorphous substance nor meaningful numbering. We imagine it in the cries, the vocalizing, the gestures of infants; it functions, in fact, in adult discourse as rhythm, prosody, plays on words, the non-sense of sense, laughter.  
(qtd in Schor, 211)

Laughter's subversive effect on symbolic stability is signalled even more strongly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the suppression of the feminine is given an even greater literalisation. Although Offred is often moved to laughter by the ludicrousness of the Gileadean regime and the ironies of her place within it, hilarity is forbidden. Public derision would swiftly bring equally public reprisals. Her resistance is generally conducted as silently as her servitude, restricted to the unspoken word plays of imaginative escape. To articulate her rebellion would be fatal in more ways than one: abandoning herself to the black comedy of her circumstance would shatter the tenuous stability that she desperately needs to preserve to survive. Yet the institutionalised infantilisation unwittingly nurtures semiotic predispositions. In spite of the danger, and in spite of her self, Offred feels her protective armour disintegrate: "Then I hear something, inside my body. I've broken, something has cracked, that must be it. Noise

is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face" (156). The suddenness of the unconscious onslaught is nearly uncontrollable and her awareness of its consequences provokes even greater titillation:

I cram both hands over my mouth as if I'm about to be sick, drop to my knees, the laughter boiling like lava in my throat. I crawl into the cupboard, draw up my knees, I'll choke on it. My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter.  
(156)

Offred's subsequent attempts to "compose herself" are ironically appropriate in terms of one of her earlier comments: "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. *What I must present is a made thing, not something born*" (76, my emphasis). The overwhelming nature of this earth-shattering bodily upheaval recalls the ecstasy of feminine *jouissance*. The generally acknowledged untranslatability of the term only reinforces its place as outside the symbolic order -- a pleasure that Lacan "jokingly" refers to as "beyond the phallus". For her own safety's sake she must quell this corporeal insurrection but its very presence is the possibility of "avoiding inhibition through laughter" (Kristeva, *DL*, 285). Just as Offred is suppressed by the Gileadean economy so the semiotic is suppressed in the symbolic order. As both text and experience convey, neither are wholly eliminated.

Indeed, Offred is merely part of a more general subversion that ruptures the Gileadean economy. The course of her narrative establishes that there is instability in even the most regimented patterns. Although Gilead is founded on the suppression of the feminine, and the sublimation of "the world as it was" into the political unconscious, it is this very factor that returns to mark the political body. What is under erasure is in fact always already inscribed. Paternal interdict is transgressed by other discourses, other pleasures. The masculine wall of domination is undermined by the disseminating rhizomatic of the suppressed feminine. And the explosive potential of this revolutionary feminine subject position is variously realised by virtually every character in the novel: the handmaids exchange forbidden personal information often under the very eye/I of their oppressors; Serena Joy knits scarves that are marked with her own individuality and desire and it is she who proposes Offred's forbidden liaison with Nick -- like the official doctor, Serena Joy voices the "heresy" of masculine infertility; Mayday flourishes as an underground organisation and even "the new, treacherous Ofglen" proffers unofficial information (297). The proclaimed power of the Father's Law is total, *but in name only*, since it is continuously challenged by a multitude of major and minor infidelities. (It is perhaps the ultimate irony that Gileadeans must swear allegiance to an order whose central premise is that of institutionally sanctioned infidelity.) Even the Commander indulges in subversion by giving rein to his illicit desires in an attempt to circumvent the impersonality of the very regime he has engineered. Yet this defiance of symbolic norm

is not the rebellion of the oppressed but the arrogance of the oppressor: "He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it" (248). Since he is responsible for formulating the Law he mistakenly believes that he can breach it without impunity. But, like Frankenstein, his own creation eventually destroys him. In any case, as the veiled optimism of the "Historical Notes" suggests, the Gileadean order does not survive. Offred's narrative shows that the seeds of its eventual decline and fall were sown at its inception. (Semiotic) subversions can never be decisively quelled.

Whilst Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic exchange presents a useful metaphor for a feminine subversive force, her theories contain much that is problematic. Although Atwood is certainly not writing exemplary French feminist paradigms<sup>12</sup>, it is interesting that even those texts most amenable to this kind of reading raise crucial issues that in Kristeva's texts remain unaddressed. Kristeva's implicit linking of women with the semiotic dimension of a repressed femininity carries unacknowledged dangers. Her description of the semiotic as the *negativity* masking the death drive, the maternal *abyss* of pre-subjectivity and, above all, the *unspeakability* of a pre-linguistic realm, are close to the very stereotypical constructions that have maintained women's historical and contemporary marginality: woman as hole, lack, darkest Africa, enigma, dis-order, disease -- woman as silent. Hence the narrator in *Surfacing* gives a normative (masculine) "reading" of the appearance of her madness: "This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity" (190). The unsettling historicity of these identifications is joined by the just as discomfiting ahistoricity of the model Kristeva uses: the Oedipal topology. Her uncritical adoption of this metaphor involves the equally uncritical recognition of the role of the phallus in the structuring of identity. The *necessity* of the social contract, and therefore Symbolic Law, makes of the latter a monolith as unquellable as the semiotic. (Considering the frequency of the penis/phallus conflation, the implications are obvious.) Maternity's introduction of a permanent calling into question unfortunately implies the permanency of the phallus. Even her ideal alternating subject traverses a threshold governed by the phallus as host and transcendental signifier. Thus, in advocating revolution Kristeva is preserving sovereignty: in many ways she can be seen as reinforcing the rule of the Symbolic Law of the Phallus rather than suggesting the possibility of a way beyond it.

Yet the textual revolution that Kristeva promotes is put forward in the confidence of following political overthrow: "Within this apparent asociality [the subject in process/on trial], however, lies the social function of texts: the production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations, and thus joining in the process of capitalism's subversion . . . " (*RPL*, 105). As Moi so aptly points out,



however, in the light of Kristeva's split speaking subject (and even more, *le sujet en procès*), exactly *who* is this presumably conscious revolutionary agency? (170) Why *should* this experience encourage political revolution? And what of collective revolution? Kristeva's theory seems to promote the very individualism encouraged by the capitalism she despises. In any case, what of real, oppressive conditions? Offred's semiotic experience may be psychically/psychologically efficacious (and even that is questionable), but it does not significantly alter her material circumstances. She is as imprisoned at the conclusion of this "revolutionary rupture" as she is at its beginning. Kristeva seems more intent on the possibilities of rebellious textual displacement than she does on the real conditions of historical oppression. And indeed, according to the exclusive nature of the symbolic, the texts she proclaims so subversive -- Joyce, Artaud, Mallarmé, Céline -- should surely be outlawed. Instead, these exponents of the *avant-garde* have been incorporated into the canon and lauded as master narrators. Is Kristeva really so unaware that if revolution cannot be quelled it will be recuperated and contained?

Systems cannot be transgressed from without; in order to subvert the symbolic one must be positioned within it. According to a psychoanalytic reading, women and men are positioned differently in this order. In spite of Lacan's identification of the split *alienated* subject the position of the masculine subject within the Symbolic is a less complex, certainly a more familiar, identification. Yet nowhere does Kristeva salute a *feminine* textual revolutionary. Her dissidents are all men; men, furthermore, "whose masculinity is placed into question by [their] refusal to abandon a feminine, pre-Oedipal, semiotic attachment" (Grosz, *SS*, 98). But surely the "subjectivity" she privileges would be more amenable to women, if only due to a trebled alienation from/within a patriarchal system. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's perceptions are certainly altered -- revolutionised -- by her semiotic immersion but it is not an exchange I could see David, (or Peter from *The Edible Woman*, for that matter), willingly undergoing. What stake would such men as these have in risking their masculinity? Why abandon a system that assures their identity (and dominance)? What would attract such a subject to do so other than Kristeva's assertion that such activity is efficacious? The narrator's pregnancy is perhaps necessary for her psychological and emotional renewal but it is unlikely that Atwood is promoting wholesale reproduction as the path to feminine salvation. Yet Kristeva presents maternity as one of the ultimate subject positions. Considering women's historical suppression by relegation to the reproductive function (and *especially* in the light of *The Handmaid's Tale*), how truly subversive and/or revolutionary is that?

Rejecting essentialism and addressing the problematics of the speaking subject, Kristeva bypasses the problematics of the *feminine* speaking subject. By adopting the Lacanian Symbolic entry she inherits the dilemma of the adoption of the infinitely alienable shifter "I", a shifter that has been exhaustively exhibited as masculine-identified:

Insofar as she speaks, insofar as she works, woman is part of the symbolic; yet she is not positioned there in the same way as the male. For one thing, where he is positioned in the symbolic with the attributes of active, subject and phallic, she is positioned as object, passive and castrated. The symbolic (that is, masculine) subject is the subject who can say 'I' of himself; it is never clear that in saying 'I' the feminine subject is not in fact referring to a (masculine) 'you'. (Grosz, *SS*, 67)

In the three stage "development of feminism" that Kristeva expounds she is of course in the final decisive category (Moi, 12). She has, however, been so intent on achieving position three that she has overlooked the demands of position two (or perhaps she is all too ready to forget the problematic a priori basis of her theorizing?)<sup>13</sup> Where is the place from which a woman, or at least a constructed *feminine* "I", can speak *as a woman*? Atwood's textual resolution to this fundamental question seems more valuable to me than Kristeva's theoretical (utopian) one because it addresses the very issue of a feminine speaking subject. The narrator's determination -- on a human, national, and most importantly, feminine, level -- is implicit in her final resolution: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing" (191).<sup>14</sup>

Focussing on the potentialities of sexual differentiation, Kristeva loses sight of the realities of sexual difference. Whilst Atwood is just as concerned with transcending masculine and feminine oppositions, her texts often address what Kristeva neglects: a logic of difference. In fairness to Kristeva, her description of the semiotic *chora* is that of a space in which there is *no* sexual difference; it is only the Oedipal stage that determines (and hierarchises) sexual identity. (Thus, identifying the semiotic as feminine is useful metaphorically, or by analogy, but is in strict terms, incorrect.) In adopting the Freudian topology, however, Kristeva acceptance is uncritical. *Little men, not little women*. Contemptuous of a feminism of difference, Kristeva unwittingly espouses the logic of the Same.

And it is this very logic, this "objective" gaze of barely veiled power and desire, that constructs the feminine Other according to a masculine normative mode. As Peter's treatment of Marian in *The Edible Woman* so aptly portrays, it is an identification that ignores feminine specificity, denies feminine corporeality and censors feminine pleasures. Atwood's character's attitude is only an example of a more general tendency, and the subsumation of feminine desire by masculine discourse. With marriage approaching, Marian's agency diminishes and she allows Peter to make her decisions for her (90; 147). The dish from the menu that Peter chooses *for them both*, subtly conveys the annexation of her desires by his. Identifying her wants Peter identifies his own. In addressing Freud's famously unanswered question -- what does woman want? -- Lacan effects the same kind of slippage. His example of feminine *jouissance* takes Bernini's St Teresa as its model; an almost stereotypical embodiment of the carnal and the sacred, the Madonna and the whore. Her desire is *insatiable* (c.f. *Malleus Maleficarum*). Answering

this question -- one that should surely be addressed to a *woman* -- it is not insignificant that his certainty, his sure knowledge, is premised on visual evidence: "you have only to go and *look* at the Bernini statue in Rome *to understand immediately* that she's coming, *no doubt about it*" (qtd in Gallop, 35, my emphasis) Lacan constructs feminine *jouissance* by appealing to the order of the gaze, the same order with which Peter constructs his soon-to-be bride. And the result is exactly the Same. Although Lacan's discussion centres of feminine exclusion, women are the very thing notably absent from his reflections. "She" cannot speak her desire but Lacan -- a man -- can. St Teresa is the (hysterical) *body*, but Lacan is the *voice*. This example only highlights the alternatives offered to women by the symbolic contract: to become a voice without a body or a body without a voice.

To speak, therefore, involves the censorship of the body, the suppression of the corporeal. Symbolic Law prohibits the speaking of desire, especially it would appear, feminine desire. The immediate reprisal following such transgressions and the symbolic punishment in merely heightened form is evoked in "Notes Towards A Poem That Can Never Be Written" (1981: *SPH*, 79-81). Here, the specifically Amnesty International context can be viewed as symptomatic of a more generalised politics of oppression:

The woman lies on the wet cement floor  
.....  
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.  
She is dying for the sake of the word.  
It is her body, silent  
and fingerless, writing this poem.

For the feminine subject the price of speech is an expensive one. Atwood's poem takes corporeal prohibition to its logical conclusion -- a frightening example of Cixous' metaphorical observation: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (LM,250). Cixous' avowed project is to unite the feminine body and (feminine) speech. It would appear that Atwood's project is not dissimilar: it is the *body* that writes the poem that can never be written, the poem that obviously *has*.

Cixous is concerned with reclaiming the body that has been suppressed, with reintroducing its materiality to language. Ostensibly, this links her project with Kristeva's, but Cixous is concerned with the specificity and autonomy of feminine desire. Therefore, she rejects the identification of femininity as the passive reflection of masculine needs and masculine desires by claiming that women must "write the body" (LM). No longer is it acceptable for the articulation of feminine *jouissance* to be a solely masculine prerogative and preserve. As the speaker says in "Foretelling the Future" (1978: *SPH*, 3), "The moon seen from the moon / is a different thing." Atwood, like Cixous, seems intent on inscribing psycho-sexual specificity with a *different* meaning.

The gift of the symbolic order, like the devotion described in Atwood's poem, is an incapacitating one. For women, the symbolic entry is not a particularly positive one, based as it is on the necessary recognition of incompleteness. Mockingly, Cixous comments on the "benefits" that the father bestows: "Without him she'd remain in a state of distressing and distressed undifferentiation, unbordered, unorganised, 'unpoliced' by the phallus . . . incoherent, chaotic, and embedded in the Imaginary in her ignorance of the Law of the Signifier" (CD?, 46). And the revolution that Cixous advocates, the realisation that she wants to promote, is that of the protagonist in *Surfacing* -- a refusal of a metaphor that cements women's marginalisation: "Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they only have to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning?" (LM, 255). Contrary to their critics' beliefs (Plaza, Felman, Moi), neither Cixous nor Irigaray are placing the body at the centre of a search for feminine essence. Rather, they are concerned with constructing a *discursive* identity that challenges the identity and presence of the masculine "I". "Writing woman" is thus best described as a textual effect, a certain kind of discourse, a practice that "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system" (Cixous, LM, 253). The return of the repressed. In the subversion of phallogocentric conventions -- Cixous' *voler* metaphor is its epitome -- Atwood's texts' marked inattention to the conventional priorities of linearity and closure, in either thematic or linguistic terms, constitutes what Cixous refers to as *écriture féminine*.

This textual effect on phallogocentric structures is exemplified by "Men At Sea", where the masculine adventure is subtly deconstructed (1985-6: *SP11*, 161). The appeal of these salty stories is the appeal of the masculine universe: action, courageous battle, taciturn self-sufficiency and "above all no women." True grit. Running away to sea "he" evades bodily contact, hence the rejection of a submersible vessel: "Not on a submarine, too claustrophobic and smelly . . . ." Yet the teleology of his narrative is interrupted by the very corporeality it avoids:

What does he say? He says the story of how he got here, to her. She says: But what did you feel?

And his eyes roll wildly, quick as a wink he tries to think of something else, a cactus, a porpoise, never give yourself away, while the seductive waves swell the carpet beneath the feet and the wind freshens among the tablecloths.

The cohesion of his tale is disrupted by the discourse of another order, a profoundly disturbing one if his reaction is anything to judge by. And it is a woman who returns what would otherwise have remained suppressed, introducing a space in which he is indubitably out of his depth. With one query she foregrounds the absence on which his comforting narrative is based. Such is the unsettling force not only of the body, but also of the question-effect. In "Marrying the Hangman", however, the force of body and

voice has a less favourable outcome (1978: *SPII*, 21-3). The materiality of the imprisoned woman's voice has an undeniably tempting effect: "She uses her voice like a hand, her voice reaches through the wall, stroking and touching." Her poetic voice evokes a tactile sensuality -- "water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood" -- but his is the denotative voice of phallocratism: "foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife." In the light of the poem's allusive title and the coupling of their final words, this union seems one he is unable to bear.

Irigaray also speaks of a discourse and pleasure that is outside the phallogentric system, one she provocatively describes as "centred a bit too much on the one and the same" (SØ, 103). Countering Freudian doctrine she also achieves a theory of *sexuality*. Using the female genital configuration as her model, Irigaray proposes an economy devoted to touch, one whose pleasures and effects are multiple. With the notion of two lips distinctly separate yet inherently joined, Irigaray's example is a demonstration of the discourse it presents: "This image defies binary categories and forms of classification, being undecidably inside and outside, one and two, genital and oral" (Grosz, *SS*, 116). Feminine speech is thus as decentered as feminine *jouissance*. The prioritised terms that the hangman's partner uses -- "nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes" -- indicates not only Irigaray's contention that "woman has sex organs just about everywhere" (SØ, 103), but also that the conventional identification of feminine sexuality is lowest on her personal agenda. The logic of the Same is therefore destabilised by a contradictory logic; one that does not adhere to one fixed site or law but flows in all directions; it is never wholly one or two but is one and two. As such it is unquantifiable by a masculine economy and disruptive of its unitary "rules of conduct". As Grosz says:

To speak as a woman means to undo the reign of the 'proper' -- the proper name, property, propriety, self-proximity. It means to evoke rather than designate to overflow and exceed all boundaries and oppositions. . . . To speak with meanings that resonate, that are tactile and corporeal as well as conceptual, that reverberate in their plurality and polyvocality.  
(*SS*, 132)

Faced with a logic of desire so alien to his own, the executioner in Atwood's poem brings his work quite literally, home.

The damaging effects of a masculine conception of femininity echo through the opening chapters of *Lady Oracle*. Here, the discourses of Word and body are textually juxtaposed. Joan Foster's childhood experiences represent a catalogue of attempts to socialise her into requisite femininity. And it is her mother who exacts the regulatory response; her mother's desire that an objectified Joan must fulfil: "Our relationship was professionalised early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product" (66). As a *sub-ject* of the order of the Same, Joan's mother attempts a similar conversion in her daughter. Symbolically, she names her after a movie star: Joan

Crawford, no doubt attracted by the "admirable" associations of cinematic stardom (42). Therefore, she expects Joan to take the starring role in a life-story of her direction. When it becomes obvious that Joan is unlikely to rise to this assumed characterisation, her condemnatory exasperation is made increasingly apparent. (In many ways, however, Joan does rise to the bait. Her progression through the novel, and her life, is one that embodies a host of assumed disguises.) Joan disrupts her mother's ordered existence for she refuses to fit into the appropriate feminine category. As she says: "The only way I could have helped her to her satisfaction would have been to change into someone else" (55). In one sense, the maternal project fails, in another, it is profoundly successful. Joan, however, replies to her mother's discourse *on* the body with the discourse *of* the body on which the battle is staged: "The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body" (69). Replying to a Word that would reduce her in every way, Joan's resistance is the assertion of corporeal inflation: she purposely and defiantly grows *larger*.<sup>15</sup>

*The Edible Woman* stages a similar confrontation between discourses of the body and desire. Whilst this conflict is most apparent in the relationship of Marian and Peter, Marian's increasingly prohibited relation to food constitutes the strident discourse of a body from which she is alienated. And as supposedly "neutral territory", Marian's body becomes the field on which this war is waged. As Marian becomes progressively caught (and constructed) in the web of Peter's desire, her prophetic dream of dissolution is realised (43). Slowly, it dawns on her that Peter does not even think of her in three-dimensional terms; to him she is "a stage prop, a two-dimensional outline" (71). His detached, de-personalising touch is equated with possessive, potentially damaging speculation:

Then he would run his hand gently over her skin, without passion, almost clinically, as if he could learn by touch whatever it was that had escaped the probing of his eyes. Or as if he was trying to memorize her. It was when she would begin feeling that she was on a doctor's examination table that she would take hold of his hand to make him stop.  
(149)

Earlier, Marian wonders if Peter does not in fact regard her as "a lavatory fixture" (62). Her increasing dis-connection from her own corporeality heralds an accompanying lack of connection between sign and signification. When Peter places an ashtray on her naked back after having satisfied *his* desires, Marian is apparently unaware of the meaning of this gesture: her body is transformed into a receptacle for his spent pleasures. Little wonder that Marian sees her body as one "no longer quite her own" and feels like a discarded piece of rubbish: "All at once she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (218). Whilst Marian largely submits to the ideal of femininity that Peter demands, her body summarily rejects

it.<sup>16</sup> Her much extolled "commonsense" -- her consciousness -- results in submission to Peter's economy of desire but her less conscious attitude to touch belies the strength of her fidelity. In many ways Marian regards Peter as he does her, taking him at face value (61), and describing only his sanitised, surface appearance: "[His] arm was like the bathroom: clean and white and new" (61). Yet contemplating his body she longs for tactility, for friction, "something the touch could fix on instead of gliding over"(61). Peter is a smoothie in more ways than one. Her later reaction to Peter's assumed surfaces -- his clothes -- reveals her dawning realisation of the specular touch that imprisons her: "How could they hang there so smugly asserting so much invisible silent authority? But on second thought [her emotion] was more like fear. She reached out a hand to touch them, and drew it back . . ." (229). Marian's own economy of desire is revealed by her relationship with Duncan to whom she responds in primarily tactile terms (Bromberg, 19). Her flight from Peter's mechanistic gaze and subsequent liaison with Duncan initiates a sensual re-connection that culminates in the union of body and desire: the subversive discourse of the edible woman she constructs. Eating the cake herself, she simultaneously regains her own materiality and rejects Peter's specular construction of her. Asserting the autonomy of her *own* body and her own desires, Marian moves from consumed to consumer.

Although *Surfacing* has an equally favourable outcome, the battle on and over the body has more disturbing consequences. As the site of conflict between two opposing economies, the narrator's sense of corporeal self becomes decisively disparate. Her domination by a masculine economy, however, results in not only her own anaesthetised state -- the death of her body -- but also in the death of her unborn child. Her emotional paralysis is triggered by the abortion she undergoes, but it is sustained by the alien rhetoric of the economy that demanded it. Thus, the death of her body is continuously reinscribed by the stranglehold of a language that is inauthentic. Early in the novel the narrator describes the constriction of her throat, something "it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that go into your ears meaning nothing" (11). Only later is it revealed that her bodily betrayal was effected with a linguistic Judas kiss: "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (47). As a consequence she feels equally alienated from an order in which the body is suppressed and from a language that is not her own. Explaining her feelings to Joe she speaks the "mechanical words" of a "talking doll" (87). Language itself has been castrated of its sexuality, and therefore its vitality: "There are no dirty words any more, they've been neutered" (45). Her childhood reminiscences, however, catalogue her developing participation in an economy terrified by the physical: "the worst [words] in any language were what they were most afraid of and in English it was the body, *that was even scarier than God*" (45, my emphasis). The scrapbooks of

her girlhood proffer image upon image of feminine conformity and a symbolic pastiche of "women's dresses clipped from mail order catalogues, *no bodies in them*" (91, my emphasis). Successful socialisation, it would appear, requires the successful suppression of the abjected body. In some ways the alienation the protagonist feels could be viewed as an intensified consequence of her entry into a derivative order: "what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it" (111). Specificity is replaced by superficiality and a lack of authenticity. Linguistic suppression is merely another form of corporeal suppression and the result is a mortifying bodily harm like that of "a severed thumb; numb" (108). And the narrator can only cope with this amputation by sinking deeper into the economy that instigated it, repressing the raw-nerved response to literal execution:

I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled.  
(48)

This phallogentric cancellation of feminine autonomy and specificity is textually signalled by the unnamed status of the principal character. This "lapse" in nomenclature offers a multitude of possible readings: the narrator's refusal of the name conferred upon her by an authoritative and alien economy; a defamiliarising Atwoodian ploy to allow the development of her specificity in other ways; the symbolism of her erased, victimised status makes of her an Everywoman. All are plausible and they are certainly not mutually exclusive. Her mythical journey from psychic and emotional paralysis to unified agency is a modern moral allegory. The novel's progress is the narrator's, as she textually and experientially writes her own body. This positive re-evaluation is linked with her mother and the bird-like imagery that surrounds her (and strategically surfaces in the narrative). Cixous' description of the woman-effect being like that of birds and robbers only enhances this connection: the narrator's final victorious achievement is the ability to name herself.

The narrator contrasts her "husband's" traitorous language -- love, the magic word -- with her mother's "foolproof magic formula" of "gesture and word" (79). Unlike the false, many-layered narratives that surround her memory of the former, her memory of her mother takes the form of a clear charm-like image: "That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, *arms upraised as though she was flying*" (79, my emphasis). Considering her discomfort with the symbolic order of language it is surely significant that this reminiscence is conveyed in a *visual* register. (This vivid image is textually juxtaposed with the effects of feminine adulthood for the narrator: the pill clouds her vision.) Her final image of her mother is of a similarly natural correspondence. Surrounded by a community of birds she transforms into one, becoming a mere one amongst many. The mother's bird-like characterisation and dubious position *vis à vis*



"normal" femininity(108), recalls Cixous' evocation of the feminine textual effect: "Flying is women's gesture -- flying in language and making it fly" (LM, 258). Her gift is the narrator's realisation that "we have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative" (LM, 258). Confronting her own complicity in her child's death and her own subsequent anaesthesia, she regains sensory perception and eventually, her drowned child. Finally, her "husband" assumes less horrific proportions, becoming just a normal product of a system with too few choices (188-9); a system that, like the charlatan of "Foretelling the Future" (1978: *SPH*, 3), "string[s] you / a line with *birdgut*," (my emphasis). At the conclusion of *Surfacing* the narrator is poised to leave with Joe, the man whom she values for his very physicality. Although she is less convinced, there is an implicit optimism in their potential union: Joe is the closest she can get to authenticity - he is not American, he is uncomfortable with words, and he is only "half-evolved" which is why she can trust him. His trustworthiness was, however, signalled at the outset when he is described as one of a species nearing extinction: "Secretly he would like them to set up a kind of park for him, *like a bird sanctuary*" (8, my emphasis).

In "Lives of the Poets" the poet, Julia Morse, has an equal empathy for birds, regarding language as a vehicle for flight: "Did I really believe that language could seize me by the hair and draw me straight up, out into free air? But if you stop believing, you can't do it any longer, you can't fly" (*DG*, 193). Writing poetry is not a detached, impersonal affair, but involves "worrying away at a piece of paper, gnawing the words, shredding language" (187). Yet selling her art as a package deal with her body she is loathe to proffer these materially loaded, well-chewed words. She reads "only her most soothing poems", not wanting, as she puts it, "to disturb anyone" (193). But Julia hates the public scrutiny involved with these poetry readings and expects some kind of seizure at her every introduction. Her fear is that identified by Cixous:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away -- that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak -- even just to open her mouth -- in public.  
(LM, 251)

Indeed, Julia feels an unidentified disapproval: "It was as if something was against these readings and was trying to keep her from them" (185). This prohibiting force does effect the suppression of a bodily discourse but the result is a proliferation of discomfiting material afflictions. The body can never be wholly suppressed.

The body of Julia's poetry can perhaps best be viewed as the abjected body of the symbolic order (the feminine body). Writing and blood are certainly firmly linked in the story: Julia's first sign of her nosebleed comes in the form of a blood-bespattered page. Contemplating a journey down the *public* hotel corridor she discards the idea, imagining the horror her blood-stained appearance would evoke in another guest -- and his firm

*rejection* of this apparition. (183) Social strictures concerning the bodily fluids -- of which blood is one -- testify to the psycho-social fear of liminal rupture, threatening the cohesion of the subject's clean and proper body. As Grosz so succinctly says:

Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality -- those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable.  
(SS, 73)

Whilst Julia may evoke this horror in others, neither death nor her own obvious materiality seem to bother her. "There's something to be said for a place where absolutely nothing grows," she says to the disconcerted young graduates, "Bald. Dead. Clean as a bone. Know what I mean?" (184) Instead of violently rejecting the sign of her own mortality Julia physically introjects it, in an action akin to that of the pre-symbolic child: "She licked, tasting salt" (184). Even her language is that of abjection: "*Piss right off*" she says to Marika, in silent, inner revolt (189). Therefore, the product of her "affliction" is explicitly related to menstrual blood, a waste product connoting perhaps the fullest horror of abjection: "Blood, the elemental fluid, the juice of life, by-product of birth, prelude to death. The red badge of courage" (191-2). Outraged by her partner's infidelity, Julia imagines a poetry reading in which linguistic and corporeal discourse will finally be united. Experiencing an internal upsurge similar to that of Offred's semiotic convulsions, she feels that "something is hungry, something is coiling itself" (195). Instead of suppressing the totality of her disturbance and proffering only kosher poetic refreshments -- "she is supposed to be good for them, they must open their mouths and take her in" -- Julia will rupture their taboos with a subversive and corporeal reading. She will give them the text of her own body: "She will step across the stage, words coiled, she will open her mouth and the room will explode in blood" (195).<sup>17</sup> As Cixous says, "she draws her story into history":

Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking.  
(LM, 251)

Linking physicality and textuality, Cixous draws upon a feminine libidinal economy that is unconcerned with sociality's prescribed "rules of conduct": closure, containment, unitary desires, propriety. For her, a female-sexed text is "an outpouring . . . which can appear in primitive or elementary texts as a fantasy of blood, of menstrual flow etc, but which I prefer to see as vomiting, as 'throwing up', 'disgorging'" (CD?, 54). Julia Morse's *projected* text certainly fulfils Cixous' conception and introduces the threat of a bloody revolt. It is a revolution signalled in the symbolism and etymology of her name

(*OED*: *morsus*; bite). Thus, Julia introduces the *bite* of *an other* language, *an other* bodily code.

If the object is that which the symbolic order must repress or contain then the handmaids of Gilead are products of abjection. Although the colour of blood constitutes their very definition -- their only identity -- it is a sign divorced from its context. Emblematic of their social function, red is contained in a nun-like habit. The material symbolism is thus cleansed, legitimated. (Offred herself draws ironic connections with other sublimating master narratives. "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Red Dancing Shoes" are cynically invoked as similar containments of women's improper bodies.<sup>18</sup>) The handmaids, however, are prohibited from a proper relation to the blood with which they are marked: according to the rigid taboos of this religious economy menstruation is not only unclean but also a failure. This society's disavowal of the body and of bodily products is exemplified by the Birthing Ceremony in which the *crucial* materiality of the handmaid's body is ritually erased. Symbolic impregnation is linked with symbolic birth, but here the Wife bears a child quite literally without the mess. Although the *sign* of blood is ostentatiously displayed, *real* blood is systematically repressed.

Yet the equivalent masculine by-product -- sperm -- is just as ritualistically encouraged. Indeed, the monthly Ceremony, which involves the religious preparation of the whole household, centres on this one sanctioned (e)mission. Abjection is obviously in the eye of the beholder. In a lyrical passage in *Speculum*, Irigaray also notes the valorisation of sperm at the expense of blood and links it with the masculine subject's violent rejection of the uterine. Whilst her evocation is as chilling as the figurative execution meted the handmaids, it also foregrounds the irrepressibility of the maternal debt. Blood will (always) out:

Perhaps blood will have the freedom of the city, and the right to circulate, only if it takes the form of ink. The pen will always already have been dipped into the murdered bodies of the mother and the woman and will write in black, in black blood (like) ink, the clotting of its (his) pleasures.  
(126)

Yet the desires and pleasures of the handmaids remain as unacknowledged as their identities. Whilst the Commanders' desires are catered for by various "diversions", the Gileadean economy demands of the handmaids a "libidinal continence" (Irigaray, *Spec*, 127). Although it valorises the feminine, the totality of feminine experience is divided up and sectioned off: the handmaids are constructed in totally biological terms. The ironically named Aunts are both the prison guards of the feminine body and the procuresses for masculine desires. Thus it is hardly surprising that Offred avoids the vision of her own naked body because "[she doesn't] want to look at something that determines [her] so completely" (73). Bearing the "cattlebrand" tattoo of her masters, her body is not her own. But Offred's present erasure by the Gileadean theocracy has an

ironic pre-echo. Driven by her feminist morality, Offred's mother burns the literature of pornography, that which constructs the feminine as the submissive mirror to masculine desire. These fires of salvation, however, confer a double erasure as Offred watches "parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes" (49).<sup>19</sup>

Libidinal continence is a demand, but it is also a protection, considering the impersonality of the Ceremony. Divorcing herself from her all-too-public body, Offred divorces herself from the degradation of this markedly *jouissance*-free experience. Armouring herself against the indignity, she pretends "not to be present, not in the flesh" (169). In other situations, however, she cannot suppress her prohibited tactile desires; she hungers "to commit the act of touch" (21). Denied the written word, the only text she has to inscribe is her own body. Therefore, in the face of a force that wants to diminish her -- to dry her out -- she uses the stolen butter in a private moisturising ceremony (107). A body of one's own is, however, a dangerous possibility that is rigidly policed; this economy fears only certain kinds of escapes: "the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (18). Offred's lever lies in this very corporeal potential. Hers is the unacknowledged power inscribed in the very basis of the Gileadean hierarchy -- the power of life and death; her own and her child's: "I have something on [the Commander] now. What I have on him is the possibility of my own death" (198). Even the Wives use their bodies in a bid for more freedom. Operating by means of an "invisible, unspoken" list, they fall ill one at a time allowing the other Wives a private excursion to gather at their bedside. Communication occurs through the language of the body. It also proffers the possibility of subversive discourse: Offred and Ofglen's relationship is fostered through eye contact; Moira and Offred communicate through hand signals; Nick is probably the best example: Offred regards him as her "flag", her "semaphore. Body language" (190). It is with Nick that she is able to give full vent to her own desires, revelling in the intoxication of another body, body contact. In fact Offred's first response to Nick is in corporeal terms: imagining what he might smell like, she sighs, "inhaling" (28). Yet the secrecy involved in the use of moisturising lotion indicates that the handmaids cleansed and proper bodies are prohibited from smelling. But Offred's narrative and actions introduce what Montrelay terms an "*odor di femina*" to the clinical official Gileadean story (qtd in Gallop, 27). Hers is the "odour of witch" this order tries to scrub off (232); "the smell of matrix" so ritualistically contained (133). This particular symbolic economy suppresses this bodily product because it signifies a specifically feminine libidinal economy:

The 'odor di femina' becomes odious, nauseous, because it threatens to undo the achievements of repression and sublimation, threatens to return the subject of the powerlessness, intensity and anxiety of an immediate, unmediated connection with the body of the mother.  
(Gallop, 27)

(Even in the post-Gilead time of Pieixoto's conference this odour of matrix is still an obscure one [324].) For Offred, however, the masculine odour is all pervasive and the nausea *it* provokes is due to the very sublimation it practices -- clinical death:

My hands smell of warm tar. I want to go back to the house and up to the bathroom and scrub and scrub, with the harsh soap and the pumice, to get every trace of this smell off my skin. The smell makes me feel sick.  
(293).

The abjected (feminine) body also figures in *Bodily Harm*, although here, Rennie participates in the generalised revulsion. Following her operation, Rennie discovers that she and her body have become a taboo subject (163). Her erstwhile lover's emotions are no longer those of desire but those of fear: "He was afraid of her, she had the kiss of death on her, you could see the marks. Mortality infested her, she was a carrier, it was catching" (201). Rennie herself avoids looking at her scar -- sign of her own mortality -- because she fears the transgression of bodily rupture: "she's afraid she'll see blood, leakage, her stuffing coming out" (22). Paul's desire is unaffected by the sign of her brush with death but this tallies with his inherent love of danger. Elsewhere in the novel he is described as a man who takes risks: "*About the only thing that really turned him on was danger*, as far as I could figure out" says Lora (214, my emphasis). Rennie's alienation, her anti-narcissistic attitude to her leprous body, is symbolically linked to her inability to touch. In one of the climactic flashbacks at the novel's conclusion Rennie characterises her grandmother's hands as those of a leper. The service (and lesson) her own mother performs is that of the gestural integrity of bodily contact -- she takes the hands that Rennie so fears. The strength of this woman's gesture is ironically contrasted with the silence requested by the government official, whose traitorous denial of Lora's brutal physical treatment is cemented with the perfunctory social gesture of a handshake. Meaningless contact. Faced with the all too material result of Lora's "treatment" Rennie's desire is that of abjection: she wants to throw up. But the impulse of abjection is replaced with that of introjection; implicitly, Rennie *licks up* the blood. This bodily contact, coupled with Rennie's cradling of the hand that she once found so repulsive, initiates a specifically feminine genesis. The tableau that is evoked is that of *pi  t  *; a feminised rewriting of the biblical word. The symbolic associations are widened when Rennie *re-names* Lora with the word that "has come unhooked and is hovering in the air" (298). And the union of body and language that Rennie effects is concerned not only with Lora but also with herself. Rennie is writing *her* body as well as Lora's in the birth imagery with which the narrative concludes:

She's holding Lora's left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, and yet she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there's an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she's gritting her teeth

with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning, it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done.

She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born.  
(299)

Thus, in the future that Rennie imaginatively projects, this bodily sense will never again be lost: "She can feel the shape of hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now" (300). Rennie's experience leaves her with a realisation that is not only corporeal, but also imaginative and (implicitly) linguistic: she realises a faith in her own ability *to fly*.

What Atwood, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray describe are bodily transgressions of a dominant masculine order. The power of these rebellious disturbances is the power of the repressed (feminine) body, hence its "explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return" (Cixous, LM, 256). Whilst Atwood's texts are obviously amenable to a Kristevan reading, they cannot be wholly subsumed under one theoretical umbrella. Indeed, Atwood's fictional texts raise more questions and suggest more possible answers to "the feminine issue" than Kristeva's explicitly theoretical ones. Atwood's textual strategies are probably closer to the subversively allusive evocations of Hélène Cixous. Hers is a disruption both formal and contential. (Cixous' lyrical, punning style transgresses the virilised academic austerity of Kristeva's dry rhetoric.) Atwood's mockeries of masculine desires recall Cixous' hilariously derisive remarks on their "universal" status: "Castration? Let others toy with it. What's a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meagre desire" (LM, 262). Both re-present the body and desire that has been left out of patrilinear equations. Charges of essentialism -- an identification of masculinity with the Word and femininity with the Body -- can, however, be largely quelled by the morphology of sexual identity. Sexuality is not inherent but a result of social inscription onto a sexed body: the production of certain kinds of sexuality by a pre-existing discourse. Therefore, in *Surfacing* and especially *Bodily Harm*, Atwood, like Cixous, uses a *feminine* (libidinal) economy as a basis for a *constructed* discursive feminine textual effect -- a textual construction *other* than that of phallomorphism. Irigaray identifies the result of this phallomorphic production of masculine sexuality in *Le Corps à Corps*:

In the system of production that we know, including sexual production, men have distanced themselves from their bodies. They have used their sex, their language, their technique, in order to go further and further in the construction of a world which is more and more distant from their relation to the corporeal. *But they are corporeal.*

(qtd in Grosz, SS, 118, my emphasis)

Thus, in man's identification with the phallus, that which is outside himself, he loses touch with his own materiality. In order to regain that body, the masculine must

relinquish the phantasm of control and hierarchy allowing the possibilities of *other* bodies, *other* pleasures.

The masculine body has been lost behind the univocity of the phallus. In exhorting women to write the body, Cixous is exhorting men to do the same, returning to language the archaic materiality it lacks. Whilst Atwood does not write the masculine body, the need for masculine corporeality is cast as an urgent necessity. She implies that a fear of vulnerability is what keeps the masculine from stepping out from behind the phallic fortress:

... to take  
that risk, to offer life and remain

alive, open yourself like this and become whole  
(1974: "Book of Ancestors", *SP*, 238-40)

Faced with the "military stance", closed face and frozen muscles of her lover, the speaker in "Head Against White" responds with a corporeal plea: "*Be alive* , my hands / plead with you, *Be alive* " (1974: *SP*, 232-5). Implicitly, he is possessed by the discourse that constructs him, rendering him nothing more than a two-dimensional figure of authority.<sup>20</sup> Her exasperation is that of the speaker of *Power Politics*: "You refuse to own / yourself, you permit / others to do it for you" (1971: *SP*, 156). Therefore she proffers a restorative alternative:

To move beyond the mirrors edge, discard  
These scars, medals, to pronounce

your own flesh.

"Liking men" is a process of beginning again, of returning to the body with which it all began. But assuming the de-personalised clothing of (masculine) language he assumes the de-personalised, de-corporealised mask of phallogocentric power. Imagining the innocence of "if not all men, at least some", requires "an act, of faith" and the re-tracing of the journey that progressively confers their power. (*MD*, 53-4) To return to the poem with which this discussion began, the problem perhaps lies not with men as such, but with language, "the thread their lives / [are] strung on".

# NOTES

- 1 The conflation of Lacan's complex Other with the archetypal notion of the feminine as Other is perhaps simplistic. In the context of the return of the repressed, however, it is not an unhelpful analogy to draw.
- 2 In French, this term carries a meaning that is untranslated by *split*. In his prefatory explanation of Kristeva's terminology, Roudiez more accurately describes it as a *cleavage*: "the division is inherent and natural" (Kristeva, *DL*, 18).
- 3 Whilst Kristeva in virilising fashion collapses the feminine and the maternal, that is certainly not my intent. Rather, it is to demonstrate that phallogocentric logic *does* collapse the two; the feminine is defined (among other things) by the maternal function.
- 4 A similar implication is raised in "The Settlers" (1966: *SP*, 45-6). Here, the (native?) "us" have a corporeal rather than mechanistic and domination relation to the land. Theirs is the "intermixed" body of the land itself. *Bodily* communication seems to yield more promising results.
- 5 Duncan's "identity" is singularly idiosyncratic, which may account for critics' difficulties in reconciling his relationship with Marian (Bromberg, 19n). As a child, Duncan is simply too self-absorbed to present a viable long-term alternative. As a catalyst, his presence is invaluable.
- 6 I am aware of only one critic -- Sally Robinson -- who gives the narrator's experience a Kristevan psychoanalytic reading.
- 7 This family unit (so close to Atwood's own) recurs in a number of later texts, notably "Unearthing Suite" (*BE*), and *Cat's Eye*.
- 8 This notion of the mother's strategic relation to language was suggested by the *Surfacing* lectures given by Dr P.D. Evans: University of Canterbury, September/October, 1989.
- 9 I am indebted to Nancy Bjerring's perceptive comments on David for this aspect of my discussion (602).
- 10 That the semiotic experience of "the gods" incorporates *both* the narrator's parents introduces the contention that she is retrospectively constructing an imaginary phallic mother. The confrontation with the father, however, undermines this argument's validity. The father's gift is his recognition that his way -- the way of the phallus -- was an intruding violation: "He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation" (186).
- 11 Robinson is similarly disappointed in the outcome. She says "that the novel ends in a polarization, an either/or choice that the protagonist must make -- the moment of closure" (114).
- 12 In a recent interview with B.D. Langer, Atwood makes a number of scathing comments about the post-structuralist critical project (132-3). See also Hancock (275).
- 13 Kristeva is so intent on transcending oppositions that she does not recognise the need to address them. Derrida's comments on deconstruction are, in this respect, illuminating:  

To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the . . . structure of opposition. Therefore one might proceed too quickly to a *neutralization* that in *practice* would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of *intervening* in the field effectively. We know what always have been the *practical* (particularly *political*) effects of *immediately* jumping *beyond* oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of *neither this nor that*. (*Positions*, 41)
- 14 For the theoretical critique in the preceding argument I have relied on Grosz's two excellent chapters on Kristeva in *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*.
- 15 The fixed oppositions that such a reading would imply are not as dichotomised in the novel. In typical fashion, Atwood does not allow easy positionality: Joan is attracted to the ideal of femininity that the ballet school offers: the tutu and the tiara (102). Like her experience with the daffodil man (64), any simplistic binary readings are disrupted by the ambivalence in her narrative.
- 16 In contemplating her situation Marian displays the same bodily detachment that characterised Rennie's self-examination in *Bodily Harm*; she refers to her own body as an "it" (178).
- 17 The colour and rebellious reinscription of traditional symbolism echoes that of the contemporaneous "A Red Shirt" (1978: *SPII*, 48-50):  

. . . In her bare

feet she runs across the floor,



escaping from us, her new game,  
waving her red arms

in delight, and the air  
explodes with banners.

- 18 The Puritan mentality so convincingly portrayed in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is also an implicit textual echo.
- 19 It should not be inferred that Atwood is promoting a pornographic ethic. I believe that she is foregrounding the ways in which the weapons of revolt can be appropriated by the dominant ideology, just as marginal groups can sometimes unwittingly foster the strategies of their oppressors.
- 20 The ambiguity of the poem's title and imagery posits two possibilities: the speaker is addressing a photograph/picture or a living man. It is, for me, both: the speaker is in fact addressing her lover but uses the metaphor of a flattened image to intensify her demand.

## **SOLICITING THE WORD**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.

John 1: 1-5.

Her eyes gleam, sometimes a little wickedly, for although my mother is sweet and old and a lady, she avoids being a sweet old lady. When people are in danger of mistaking her for one, she flings in something from left field; she refuses to be taken for granted.

"Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother"

*Bluebeard's Egg*, 17.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The letter of the Law. The Law of the Letter. The Father's Law. The Absolute Origin. The True Story. The Language of Man. The Word is His, graven in stone, transmitted from Father to Son in direct and linear descent, testimony to His power: the power of the Word. Incontrovertible Truth? Telling it like it is? *T'ain't necessarily so*. The face of this stone tablet is fractured by the words of the other. A bedrock, supposedly eternally firm is so riddled with a network of fissures that the inevitable is always imminent: landslide. Reiterating Lacan's conception of linguistic *glissement*, Derrida constitutes the subject's entry into language as an initiation into *différance*, a word that demonstrates the effect it invokes. The subject's alienation from the self is complemented by an alienation from the Word: "The sign is . . . deferred presence (Derrida, "*Différance*", 18). With one letter, Derrida dismantles the edifice of Holy Writ, introducing a certain linguistic atheism to the canonical text. But this heretical dissemination is not without resistance, a resistance, moreover, that is scripturally embedded. John's testimony to "the Word made flesh" (1:14) suggests the tangible connection between word and referent, sign and signified. Full and transcendental presence. The gospel of phallogocentrism. Nomenclature harnesses the chaos of body and world. The Name of the Father is therefore not a liberation from slavery but a desperate attempt to shore up the ruins. Pinning meaning to the One, the Rock is buttressed against "disastrous" slippage. *Différance*, however, pursues a case that phallogocentrism is all too eager to dismiss, hence Derrida's references to the term as an "unseemly" "infraction", "a lapse in discipline and law" ("*Différance*", 3). Derrida's status of philosophical outlaw is directly attributable to the epistemological dissidence that he "preaches". The threat that *différance* and deconstruction poses is that of an infidelity to the received Word for "*différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom" ("*Différance*", 22). The Word is taken up, but only to be carried to a point of aporia. The transgression that *différance* effects highlights the affect of Atwood's textual corpus. Atwood also is concerned with the rigorous examination of "immutable laws" and the deconstruction of "authoritative" dogma. Taking the Father's Word, she is more than likely to take His Name in vain. Frequent contextual shifts produce a network of linguistic and thematic resonances -- a verbal impasto -- that is irreducible to the One (image). Her texts engage in the play that Derrida identifies as the hallmark of *différance*

(*Positions*, 14). The "play" is neither isolated nor contained; on each and every level Atwood's texts practice this metonymical displacement. (Even to speak of slippage along a signifying chain is infortuitous. Atwoodian *glissement* does not follow a linear trajectory but rather, a rhizomatic one.) Atwood replies to the Truth of the One -- the supposed (masculine) corporeality of the (masculine) Word -- in like kind: she kicks against the pricks:

The true story is vicious  
and multiple and untrue  
.....  
... Don't ever

ask for the true story.  
(1981: "True Stories", *SPII*, 56-7)

"True stories" is an appropriate point of departure, since it catalogues the very unreliability of narratives whilst recognising the nostalgic desire that fuels the will to Truth, the firm connection between sign and signifier. In the opening section of the poem, Pound's Odysseus is invoked, he who sailed after knowledge, "the shade of a shade" (Canto XLVII, 148). For Pound, and for Atwood, the pursuit seems more worthy, certainly more engaging, than the attainment of an illusory transcendental goal. For the originator of the Odyssean master narrative it is, however, another matter. With "Circe/Mud Poems", Atwood confronts the Word of the secular Father, Homer (1974: *SP*, 201-23). Even the form of *this* story counters that of Homer's poetic epic in the alternation of prose and poetic narrative modes. The cycle represents a substantial revisionary departure from Homeric discursive Law, for Atwood re-presents the story from Circe's point of view. In this reconsideration and transgression of narrative convention, Atwood is not unlike Sally in *Bluebeard's Egg*, whose contemporary recasting of the Grimm tale adopts the unusual (and pregnant) vantage point of "the character" of the egg. Addressing *The Odyssey*, Atwood gives voice to the voiceless in that heroic narrative, re-valuing the myth and undermining its privileged status in the Western cultural subconscious. Although *this* Circe is a different character altogether, the figure of the official story echoes throughout the text. Rather than reinscribing the authoritative version, or even recalling the classical dialogue encapsulated in Yeats' "*Ego Dominus Tuus*" (77-9), the effect is that of ironic deflation. Caught in a quotidian existence that no longer interests her, Circe merely reflects the psychological and emotional sterility of Homeric inscription: "Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island. I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind" (204). Circe's awareness of the exclusive potency of masculine adventure stories mirrors Rennie's realisation in *Bodily Harm*: "Rennie can see what she is now: she's an object of negotiation. The truth about knights comes suddenly clear: the maidens were only an excuse. The dragon was the real business. So much for vacation romances, she thinks"

(258). The interpolated story of "another traveller" implies that she too is a mute mud woman in the Homeric version, created as vacation rest and recreation for his intrepid hero. She is the archetypal "foreign country" in which, and to which, these things happen; a no-strings affair for which he is ultimately not responsible (214). Time out from the real adventure. This, however, is not necessarily the true story.

The epigraph establishes the displacement of the hero as conqueror as Odysseus/we move within the range of *Circe's* words (201). What we find is akin to a dream world for, as Lauter notes, the boat glides over land as if there were water (63). This dream-like quality implies that the submerged unconscious of *The Odyssey* is surfacing. We enter the repressed world of that text and find *another* story. The textual sanctity of a mythological past is transgressed by the anachronistic references to steam-engines and plane crashes (202). Circe's "malicious" transformations of men into beasts are realigned as the result of the latter's own actions and governed by inherent qualities rather than the former's active metamorphic powers. Later, when Odysseus "disarms" her of these powers the reductive implications of this victory are transformed into empowering ones: relieved of the fist that impels her transformations she opens "like a hand/ cut off at the wrist . . . the hand clutches at freedom"(212). Freed from the constraints of the story, Circe has a greater power; Odysseus must still submit to Homer's authority, voluntarily remaining firmly fixed within these narrative boundaries. Unlike the lush paradise of myth, Circe inhabits an island of burnt-out forests, a desert. Accordingly, she encourages Odysseus not to subscribe to the Homeric brochure but to examine the landscape for himself (207). From the first poem, it is clear that Circe considers mythic men a veritable dime a dozen. More than capable of discovering or creating any number of this ilk, Circe instead seeks a vulnerable corporeality rather than a face and armour of impervious steel. Her true adventurers are those who have escaped from the realm of myth, and, like her, occupy the peripheries. Marginality, thus, is recast as a positive positionality, one that promises hope for the future rather than an endless circling within a pre-ordained plot. The "universal appeal" of epic adventure, of heroic quest and eventual victory, is undercut by Circe's absolute indifference:

Don't you get tired of killing  
those whose deaths have been predicted  
and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting  
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward?  
(206)

Circe mimes the sales pitch beneath an heroic mythology by evoking travel brochures with their "shiny illustrations so real you can almost touch the ennui of actually being there" (207). Her observation (even the very fact of her voice), foregrounds the

selectivity involved in any discursive formation: "They leave out the insects and the castaway bottles but so would I in their place; all advertisements are slanted, including this one" (207). General derision combines with ironic mimicry in parodic discourse utterly unfaithful to the received Homeric Word. Roland Barthes would have needed only to look to Atwood's poetic cycle for the possibilities of blissful *jouissance*: "The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his [sic] behind to the *Political Father*" (53). Circe's version is a travesty of a travesty of paternal justice. The parodic aspects of her discourse and the positing of a truth *other* than that of official decree constitutes what Bakhtin refers to as "the laughing word" (59). *Her* word participates in a parodic world unified by a common purpose: "to provide the corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, languages, styles, voices; to force men [sic] to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them" (Bakhtin, 59). Certainly, Circe's reality remains unaccounted for in Homer's epic. For Bakhtin, the epic is only one of a triad of forms that express "the centralizing tendencies in language" (67), and Circe's narrative suggests that this centrality is that of the masculine (Word). In contrast, the parodic form ridicules the principles of Church and monarchy. Were Circe to be brought before such a textual tribunal, it is clear that respect would be found wanting. Hers is not an order of awe-struck prostration but rather one of comic deflation: "One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat" (205). Quite simply, Circe is bored with the Same old story. Although it is obvious that Odysseus himself is too immersed in this tale to escape its debilitating consequences (217), Circe is testimony to the ability to transcend mythological doctrine. Moving within the range of her words it is an experience that we as readers are also offered: the destruction of "the homogenizing power of myth over language" and the "[freeing] of consciousness from the power of the direct word . . . (Bakhtin, 60).

Authority is displaced. Odysseus becomes not the controlling conqueror but a pawn hopelessly entangled in an established narrative: "in the clutch of your story, your disease, you are helpless" (217). But Odysseus is initially presented as the subject-presumed-to-know, one whose life-story is a result of an emplotment over which he has sovereign control (with an ironic implication of heroic dangers "recollected in tranquillity"). Yet the plot that Odysseus fleshes out is compared with that of a child's colouring book, a book in which boundaries are always already demarcated by an absent artistic figure. His autobiographical self is diseased by the relentless course of *The Odyssey*, of which his plot and he are merely the tool. But even Homer's authority is undermined by the implication that it is Circe's head in which new adventures are brewing. Odysseus is subject to Homer but somehow Homer is subject to Circe; "But it is not finished, that saga. The fresh monsters are already breeding in my head" (217). Any illusions of authorial or self-authenticating presence are destabilised by the play of



*différance*. Rather than succumbing (however unwittingly) to the Father's Law, Circe is able to contemplate a different story from the one that imprisons her. Her vision extends beyond the realms of the master narrative. She dreams *an other* dream in a concluding lyrical evocation. The final poem reinforces "the appeal" of a repetitive mechanical narrative: "*I could recite it backwards*" (222). The attraction is non-existent. Uninterested in the inflated, expert rhetoric of mythic men, Circe envisages a second (incomplete) version, one that is untrammelled by the masculine adventure story. Here, the lovers are not combatants in a ruthless story, and the very inconclusiveness of her narrative suggests a multitude of possibilities: "The image of the second island is too open to be quite convincing -- but perhaps that is its source of power. Since Circe does not articulate her dream fully, we are encouraged to dream it onward ourselves" (Lauter, 72).

Atwood's very attention to the figure of Circe highlights the pervasive nature of the Father's *mythological* Law, the grip in which our culture is held, a culture in which who can speak and in what words is rigidly policed. Under this regime it is not only the feminine word that suffers hystericisation, but also the feminine body:

(Let go, this is extortion,  
you force my body to confess  
too fast and  
incompletely, its words  
tongueless and broken)  
(210)

His is the sanctioned power of domination but:

Nothing stays under  
for ever, everyone  
wants to fly, whose language  
is this anyway?  
(1978: "Two Headed Poems", *SPH*, 33)

According to the doctrine of phallogocentrism, it is the language of men, one in which "a word after a word / after a word is power" (*TS*: "Spelling", 63-4). Circe's characterisation of this linguistic dominance is that of extortion but the imagery is that of rape and violation. His story (and action) is ruthless, a reiteration of the more accurate re-couching of a supposedly liberating maxim: *the penis: mightier than the sword*. Power and language are inextricably linked, for the pen is held by an iron hand. Words confer power which can then be used to totalitarian effect. Linguistic assertion is superfluous when other related dominant forms are more effective:

Fists have many forms;  
a fist knows what it can do

without the nuisance of speaking:  
it grabs and smashes.

From those inside or under  
words gush like toothpaste.

Language, the fist  
proclaims by squeezing  
is for the weak only.  
(1971: "We hear nothing", *SP*, 157).

Once empowered, authority takes on an unassailable armour. Barring the means by which that position is attained, authority proclaims the naturalness of its "ahistorical" privilege and the unnaturalness of any opposition. The will to Truth colludes with the will to power, in a discourse disembodied from the desire that fuels it. The Father's discourse is one that "disavows its own discursive materiality. Like oedipalised male sexuality, it is a language that represses the plural pleasures/meanings of the whole body/text to invest them in a single meaning/organ/pleasure" (Grosz, *SS*, 129). The Word may well have been made flesh but it is a linguistic body disassociated, distanced, from its own corporeality. Yet this Creation, not to mention Adamic naming, provides the mythical justification of the unquestioned ascendancy of the masculine over/in language. One only need look at the mirror/horror story encapsulated in "Iconography" to discover that the ultimate judgement, the final word, is His (*MD*, 52). "She" epitomises the appealing maleability of the sculptor's clay but "he" is untouchable. His word has been sanctified, made transcendental by the accompanying incorporeality (absence) of the law-giving body and the admonition: *Noli me tangere*.<sup>1</sup> But Atwood, ever the doubting Thomas, probes the wound of masculine insubstantiality. The requisite faithfulness is not, however, forthcoming. Taking up the Father's Word, she does not necessarily subscribe to the letter of His Law.

"Spelling" (*TS*, 63-4), is appropriate testimony to this linguistic and mythic infidelity. Beginning with a familiar term and setting, Atwood utilises an associational logic to foreground an other meaning. The speaker reinvests a traditionally singular term with a subversive (feminine) semantic twist. Form echoes content as the daughter's entry into language is characterised not as one of meek submission, but rather an irreligious empowering initiation. The threat that this poses is demonstrated in the anecdotal catalogue of retaliatory depr(a/i)ations: "Ancestress: the burning witch, / her mouth covered by leather / to strangle words." Access to this power is, implicitly, forbidden and thus women's relationship to words introduces a Cixousian sense of revolutionary stealth/flight. Linguistic body contact is established as a furtive physical in(tro)jection as the speaker wonders how many women "closed themselves in rooms, / drew the curtains / so they could mainline words." The consequence? A peculiarly feminine textual effect, a volcanic eruption in the masculine bedrock as a repressed body surfaces:

At the point where language falls away  
from the hot bones, at the point  
where the rock breaks open and darkness  
flows out of it like blood, at  
the melting point of granite  
when the bones know  
they are hollow & the word  
splits & doubles & speaks  
the truth & the body  
itself becomes a mouth.

An explosion constituted in language for, as the speaker drily informs us, "This is a metaphor." "Spelling" describes and demonstrates the feminisation of language in a poetic text both generalised and autobiographical. Here, the child does not adopt the infinitely alienable shifter "I" but a signifier more specific to her sense of self. The poem asserts the right of the feminine to name oneself in one's own language and terms. It is therefore appropriate that the spelling performance is a game with "plastic letters". These words are not only material but also the result of a certain provisionality and play.

Atwood's own attitude towards one's own language and terms foregrounds the thorny problem of semantic conventions. Her comments are worth reproducing in full since they address the woman writer's relationship to language (and, by extension, that of the feminine):

But every writer is also locked in a battle with language because language, when you work in it, as when you work with colour if you're a painter, always seems to be too limited for what you want to do. So the question is: how do you make what you want to make with a medium that you constantly find restrictive? So every writer has a love/hate relationship with the language and I think that women writers may have it a bit more because there aren't words for some of the things they would like to say, or words have taken on certain meanings and they would like them to have other meanings. Or words have been exhausted and you have to re-energise them by putting them in different contexts -- contexts that we don't ordinarily put them in.  
(O'Brien, 182-3)

For Atwood, the answer is contained within the question. She is more than aware that language is essentially dialogic. Rather than suppressing one meaning in favour of another, contextual oscillation brings competing definitions into one discursive arena. The resulting associative linkage -- contiguity -- is a hallmark of her work, and frustrates any attempts to separate her texts into manageable critical categories. Any imposed boundaries are exploded by a complex web of resonances. Thus, whatever is present in her texts is always marked by what is absent *on every level*. Like the order of language itself, full and present meaning is always elsewhere. Whilst the subversion effected by narrative displacement and textual non-closure is a twentieth-century commonplace, Atwood's manipulative use of language sets her apart from mainstream textual strategists. *Her* words are defamiliarised and defamiliarising. Her texts foreground the play of *différance*, since any absolute singular meaning is deferred; it is a question of

undecidability, of non-suppression of difference and contradiction in a play of perpetual movement. In "Worship" (*MD*, 51), this play destabilises the piety of a masculine supplicant for the terms of devotion are not negated but ironically contextualised: "and that's you up there, shining, burning, like a candle, like a chalice, burnished; with use and service. After you've been serviced, after you've been used, you'll be put away again until needed."

If "Spelling" and "Worship" demonstrate Atwood's use of metaphoricity to unsettling effect, then "Women's Novels" exposes the masculine-marked metaphoricity of other, more conventional discourses (*MD*, 34-6). Quoting a metaphor so oft-used that it has almost reached proverbial status -- "*She had the startled eyes of a wild bird*" -- the speaker registers an initial supposed enthusiasm. Admiration is quickly undercut by derision and the assumed rage (for more) is recontextualised.<sup>2</sup> One banal metaphor is countered with another: "If I could only do these two simple things, I feel, I would be able to pass my allotted time on this earth *like a pearl wrapped in velvet*" (my emphasis). The latter only serves to highlight the eventual taming and cloistered ownership implicit in the former. Obviously, the metaphor is intended to evoke a delicate, terrified little bird but the speaker obtusely insists on an unconventional reading: "a screech owl, perhaps, or a cuckoo?" An hilarious deconstruction ensues as "*a body like a gazelle's*" elicits a literal identification of "intestinal parasites, zoos and smells" and "an untamed animal" evokes "porcupines, weasels, warthogs and skunks." Hardly romantic. But this is the very point. Instead of wandering down the "proper" associational path, the speaker attends to the letter of the Law. This "transgression", however, is only a naive response to an equally naive metaphorical usage. The path taken is only one of thousands available in the systemic maze and in any case, as the speaker says, "*metaphor leads me by the nose*" (my emphasis). These systemic troubles initiated by conflicting demands on conventional heroes and heroines occur with even the most simplistic of terms. Again, form echoes content as the taciturn monosyllables of a masculine narrative are confounded and confused by the entrance of a feminine element:

Men favour heroes who are tough and hard: tough with men, hard with women. Sometimes the hero goes soft on a woman but this is always a mistake. Women do not favour heroines who are tough and hard. Instead they have to be tough and soft. This leads to linguistic difficulties.

In a movement akin to that of *écriture féminine*, the monosyllabic order of the One is engulfed by the material polyvocality of a feminine libidinal economy, "wrapped in the octopoid arms of labial polysyllables, whispering to them with arachnoid grace: *darling, darling.*"

Atwood's strategy is the subtle introduction of a certain linguistic difficulty; Derrida's "discreet graphic intervention" ("*Différance*", 3). I am not suggesting that

finding meaning in her texts is impossible, merely that pinning meaning down to one theme or concept is continually and continuously prevented. Her textual effect is that presented by "The Page" (*MD*, 44-5):

(Under my hand the paper  
closes over these  
marks I am making it.

The words ripple, subside,  
move outwards toward the shore.)  
(1970: "Younger Sister, Going Swimming", *SP*, 136)

Here, the parenthetical remarks amplify and enhance the isolated artistry of the sister's dive as the surface of the lake is associatively linked with the poet's own blank page. Atwood's own observations on her frequent use of parentheses provide an insightful adjunct to the experiential multiplicity that her poetry (and, I believe, her prose) offers both writer and reader:

It's a sort of hesitation device, like an "um" or a "maybe" or a "perhaps". Sometimes it's a device to set one thought off from another. It means a thought is intruding and breaking up the main line of the thing. And sometimes you can have two thoughts going on at once. One in parentheses and one not in parentheses. I'm quite capable of following two thoughts at once. I do it all the time.  
(Levenson, 25-6)

By her own admission, Atwood thinks and composes in *différant* terms; *différance*, the word which itself hovers between the active and passive mood, between differing and deferring. Hers is not an exclusive textual activity but a "writerly" one. Her wordplays allow the repressed to come (in)to language, subverting univocal, universal (patriarchal) meanings that shore up the rock of language and discourse.

Offred's discourse is the prose equivalent of Atwood's poetic parentheses. In an economy that regulates both body and speech in the discipline of the One, Offred's rhizomatic imaginative tendencies constitute at least an intellectual liberation:

It's strange, now, to think about having a job. *Job*. It's a funny word. It's a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they'd say to children, when they were being toilet-trained. Or of dogs: he did a job on the carpet. You were supposed to hit them with rolled up newspapers, my mother said. I can remember when there were newspapers, though I never had a dog, only cats.

The Book of Job.  
(*HT*, 182)

Barred from economic autonomy, women are barred from effective power. Prohibiting an activity does not, however, prohibit its contemplation. In the light of Offred's "innocent" musings, paternal interdict is nothing more than a load of shit. Contemplating semantics in associational play also allows Offred to ironically comment on the reality of her situation: "The arrival of the tray, carried up the stairs as if for an invalid. An invalid, one who has been invalidated. No valid passport. No exit" (236). Words have different

meanings for different speaking subjects. Offred realigns the signifier of disability to more accurately reflect her total erasure from the Gileadean text. Possessing the paternal Word, Offred is most assuredly not seduced by it. Her wordplays recall Cixous' assertion that, 'For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to "fly"' (LM, 258). This foregrounding of linguistic dialogicism, of the flight from/with, and improper appropriation of, language, is something that Atwood regards as one of her writerly strengths: "Not all the time, but enough times, I can get the words to stretch and do something together that they don't do alone. Expand the possibilities of the language" (Hancock, 267).

Yet the fittingly titled prose poem "Mute" (MD, 49), implicitly explores the difficulties that Atwood identifies in women's relationship to language.<sup>3</sup> Like the plastic letters of the daughter's game in "Spelling", words have a material, organic presence. This presence is, however, disintegrating, rotting away. Language becomes a mere commodity in a sale -- a cut-price warehouse if the imagery is anything to judge by. The process of shopping for fresh unshop-soiled fruits raises the question of the efficacy of linguistic endeavour: nouns are "bruised", verbs come unsprung. Nothing works. Each word is infested, implicitly marked with the aged associations of other people and other times (which is the very thing that Atwood utilises to such subversive multiple effect). A sense of the unclean is reinforced by the speaker's desire for purity: "how do you wash a language?" Indeed this language -- the language of man? -- introduces the powerful horror of abjection: "There's the beginning of a bad smell . . . Your mouth feels rotted." If the speaker is, as I surmise, a feminine one, then the masculine subject's fear surrounding the liminal body is here directed at the abjected symbolic order of language. A revolutionary reversal and a decisive comment on the feminine speaking subject's relation to a totally alien economy. Considering Atwood's commitment to active participation to effect change (BH ; TS ; "Solstice Poem", 1978: SPII, 37-40; "Orpheus [2]", 1984: SPII, 138-9), then the admonition to avoid involvement is certainly ironic. The denial of evil in voluntary blindness, deafness and silence achieves nothing but stagnation. The question is not one of withdrawing or of waiting for the appropriate newly minted linguistic coinage to descend in annunciatory fashion from the heavens, but rather one of giving the spent currency a new lease of life. Facing linguistic putrefaction, Atwood's textual resolution *is* the re-energising she describes; taking the compost of a literature of exhaustion she fashions one of replenishment, "the generation of life, mud and light".

It is a peculiarly feminine renaissance, what I call the *feminisation* of the symbolic order of language. Whilst this fluid force *is* disruptive, it does not seek to return the paternal logos to the dust from which it sprang, but rather to reintroduce the very materiality of the originary clay. As Chantal Chawaf so convincingly argues, "Language

through writing has moved away from its original sources: the body and the earth. Too often GOD was written instead of LIFE" (177). Thus Atwood inscribes what phallogocentrism erases, a feminised awareness of the body, of touch, of blood, of fluidity and life:

Language, like the mouths  
that hold and release  
it, is wet & living, each

word is wrinkled  
with age, swollen  
with other words, with blood, smoothed by the numberless  
flesh tongues that have passed across it.

Your language hangs around your neck,  
a noose, a heavy necklace;  
each word is empire,  
each word is vampire and mother  
(1978: "Two Headed Poems", *SP II*, 31)

If the (masculine) linguistic vampire is a blood-sucker, then the mother's linguistic gift is life-affirming. Language is an empire of legions in which the noose can be changed to a necklace, in which pregnancy is a possibility that can never be foreclosed. The dialogic phenomenon so sensually evoked echoes Cixous' assertion that "there's *tactility* in the feminine text, there's touch, and this touch passes through the ear. Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic" (CD?, 54). By inhabiting the word in the "certain way" that Derrida suggests (*Of Grammatology*, 24), Atwood returns a tangibility made unavailable by paternal prohibition. *Noli me tangere* is ignored as the Word is impressed with/by a feminine body. As Cixous says: "It's not to be found that language conceals an invincible adversary, because it's the language of men and their grammar. We mustn't leave them a single place that's any more theirs alone than we are" (LM, 257). Bearing the word, witness is borne to an other economy, an other truth (1981: "Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written", *SP II*, 81).

Thus, feminisation is a process of in(tro)jecting the self -- the felt me -- into language. And "bearing the word" raises the crucial connection between textual and physical creativity, a feminine prerogative usurped by the literary Father(s). The title of *Dancing Girls*' last story -- "Giving Birth" -- seems straightforward enough and promises an account of exactly that. But the run-on effect of the narrator's opening remarks confound not only her obviously conventional intent, but also, perhaps, our own complacency. Naming her story the narrator/author starts deconstructing and dissecting the ill-considered terminology of a language that does not reflect her experience<sup>4</sup>: "Maybe the phrase was made by someone viewing *the result only*" (225, my emphasis). When "the result" is a distanced arrangement of neatly packaged and labelled products there is a

strong implication that the phrase has a masculine origin. The doctor's act of delivery is similarly deconstructed when it is more accurately referred to the feminine process undergone: "How can you be both the sender and the receiver at once? (225) Her question, "Was someone in bondage, is someone made free?" (225), evokes the deliverance from evil that is the entreaty of The Lord's Prayer. Yet having a child is hardly the catastrophe decreed by paternal law: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis, 3:16). Therefore, according to the narrator, language is an "archaic" tongue, outmoded, dangerous. Even the *points de capiton* of this language are "rich and sticky" (228); tangible, but also treacherous. Raising an awareness of an inherent linguistic instability -- the gap between sign and signified -- the narrator also recognises the need for a communicative sign system, however flawed: "See, I can speak, I am not trapped, and you on your part can understand. So we will go ahead as if there were no problem about language" (226). Language may not be imprisoning but it is certainly restrictively viscous. Although she believes that the birth process "needs to be re-named" (225) she claims that she is not the one to do it. What she does not recognise is that the expository deconstruction she has just presented and the story that follows is that very re-naming. Ironically enough, she undercuts her own semantic interest in evoking the temporal (and temporizing) process that gives the story its slippery title: "Jeanie is on her way to the hospital, to give birth, to be delivered. She is not quibbling over these terms" (228).

Even this description is dislocated by the frequent parenthetical remarks of the narrator who tells us that the creation of Jeanie is not a device for authorial distance, but rather an attempt "to bring myself closer to something that time has already made distant" (229). Temporal constraints, it would appear, are not dissimilar to linguistic ones: "time has thickened around her so that it has become something she must propel herself through, a kind of slush, wet earth underfoot" (231). Images of necessary propulsion mirror those of expulsion; the creative act is not only evoked but also inscribed in the textual experience. "Giving Birth" traces the narrator's attempt to find the language for this "indescribable" "event of the body" (235). Body language. Descending into a "dark place" (235) -- a watery underworld -- from which she occasionally surfaces for air, Jeanie experiences a complete loss of self: "there is no *she*. This, finally, is the disappearance of language" (237). (Kristeva cites pregnancy as an experience of radical alterity but she probably did not envisage childbirth as its ultimate expression!) As for the narrator in *Surfacing*, what follows is a vision and a new sense of self. The birth of the child is also the delivery of the story and of the narrator: "It was to me, after all, that the birth was given, Jeanie gave it, I am the result" (239). The linguistic point that distinguishes Jeanie from the narrator -- her light brown hair (228) --- is eventually destabilised: her hair "slowly darkens", she becomes "someone else" (240). Giving birth



is a multiplicity of events. If feminisation is the process of putting oneself into language then the author/narrator's experience is testimony to this action. Feminine speaking subjects *bear* the word, in terms of the burdens and restrictions it imposes, but we also *bear* the word in the sense of giving birth to new configurations, new meanings, those other than that of received discourse. In contrast to the archaic language described in the opening paragraphs, Jeanie's (the narrator's) experience bears new linguistic fruits, "new words" (240).

Since men and women are constructed/situated differently in the Father's privileged, hierarchised order, it is hardly surprising to discover that women have a different or *différent* relation to the symbolic order of language (and discourse). "Bluebeard's Egg" (*BE*) opens with a narrator apparently assured of her authorial (symbolic) power: her absolute control over the plot of her life. Her narrative is, however, continuously constructed with reference to other established forms. Her husband, Ed, is a third-rate prince who manages "to make it through the forest with all its witches and traps and pitfalls and end up with the princess, who is Sally, of course" (133). Very quickly, Sally's assurance begins to falter, and her narrative becomes suffused with tell-tale indecision and anxiety. Ed's impenetrability is a wall surrounded by brambles through which Sally must hack her unprotected way. His taciturnity regarding his previous two wives causes Sally to wonder if she may not suffer the same fate: "What if he wakes up one day and decides that she isn't the true bride after all, but the false one?" (134). Thus, even before the Bluebeard fairy story is introduced, a mosaic of associative implications raise the possibility that Ed's behaviour may not due to stupidity but to indifference and deception, and that Sally's own "point of view" may be a desperate attempt to re-plot a story over which she has no control, one that does not appear to be heading towards a happily-ever-after. With a vision like that of a negative epiphany, Sally acknowledges the validity of her hitherto repressed anxieties: Ed is not the egg(head) she supposes but in fact the wicked husband, the wizard under whose spell she has fallen. His Bluebeard-like status is emphasised by the gap that Sally identifies between word and referent, sign and sense. Ed is "a heart man" (137), but his expertise lies in the realm of pump services rather than emotional commitment. His very attachment to a machine with which to inspect internal bodily equipment gives him a particularly Atwoodian malignancy: "He seemed so distant, absorbed in his machine, taking the measure of her heart, which was beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control" (145). Although dangerous, both Ed and his room hold a certain allure. According to Sally, any number of women could be seduced by the spell of his charms -- Sally is herself. Ed's power is that of silent, impervious, considered control and the danger he presents is that of his machine, a machine whose screen is capable of turning a picture of a heart "from a positive to a negative image"

(145). Sally's split-second glimpse is therefore enough to break the spell of (self) delusion, as the image Sally holds of Ed disintegrates "like a television screen going dead" (161). Indeed the reassuring spell of conventional fairy tale narratives is also broken as Sally realises that happy endings are not a given. (However, there is an implicit textual optimism: if Ed is the murderous Bluebeard then Sally could well be the wily, intrepid, ultimately triumphant, third wife.) Returning to the fictional assignment with which she has been preoccupied, Sally resolves on a point of view unacknowledged in the Grimm fairy tale: that of the egg. Sally's modern narrative fuses self and story as the symbolic motifs of heart and egg rhizome through the concluding section. As the figure unaccounted for in Ed's life, Sally is the egg "left out" of the master narrative. In contrast to the colourless, drained image that Ed's machine projects, Sally's egg/heart is shot through with crimson colour and life. Its bloody colour is testimony to her sense of violation, but also it suggests the bloody announcement of *her* story, *her* creation. Taking Bluebeard's egg from him she will hatch a vengeful feminine creature. From the ashes of a burnt-out discursive tradition -- a dehydrated Word -- a phoenix will arise. In the light of Sally's barely veiled "red" "hot" anger, the return of this phoenix from the dead suggests the feminine nemesis of Plath's "Lady Lazarus": "Out of the ash, / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (244-7).

Plath's powerful re-figuring of Lazarus in contemporary feminine form constitutes a radical appropriation of biblical narrative. Here, the miracle of death and potent resurrection is cast as a specifically feminine drama. In contrast to the medical enemy -- "Herr Doktor" -- who performs the operation for scopic pleasures and material benefits, this phoenix figure asserts the autonomy of her own desires and the subversive art form of her own body: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." Although she appears to be the victim of a genocidal regime she is someone of whom the fascistic deities -- "Herr God and Herr Lucifer" -- should "beware". *Bodily Harm* explores the same territory in the same condensed, allusive manner. Although Lady Lazarus' conscious metaphorical conflations are displaced in *Bodily Harm* into Rennie Wilford's (textual) unconscious, both texts display a similar thematic concern: the connection between the feminine body and the body politic. In more than the obvious way *Bodily Harm* is the text of the body, for Rennie's narrative is suffused with these unconscious traces. Whether Rennie realises it or not, her art -- her story -- both catalogues and protests the harm sustained on every level. As the porno artist she interviews so perceptively says: "What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can *see* it I mean, there's the themes and then there's the variations" (208). In discovering what patriarchal society deals out, Rennie discovers that the personal is political and her narrative embodies a network of thematic variations

to this end. Rennie's tale of death is her art, one that ultimately, if paradoxically, leads to new life.

What society deals out to women is bodily violation. The opening section of the novel establishes the connection between spatial and cancerous invasion, between rape and death. The intimacy presumed by the faceless stranger is echoed by the men who arrive to protect her, one of whom opens her *closet* "as if he had every right" (14), and *pumps* her for information with which to condemn her. Therefore, figures of safeguarding paternal authority are implicitly undifferentiated from the rapists from whom they protect her. Indeed, *Bodily Harm* is another text in which father figures are doers of dirty deeds. A doctor, Rennie's own grandfather is described as a territorial "tomcat", one who "[tore] babies out through holes he cut in women's stomachs" and who once "amputated a man's leg with an ordinary saw" (55). Confidence-inspiring Daniel Luoma, the man on whom she childishly imprints following her operation, saves her life, but only through offering her disfigurement or death. Herr Doktor offers a veritable wealth of possibilities. Damage to the feminine body is increasingly connected with paternal sanction. Recalling her repressed childhood, Rennie cites an example of Griswoldian discourse: "*What did she die of? Cancer, praise the Lord. That was the kind of thing they said*" (251). Bodily afflictions are associatively (and ironically) linked with divine retribution since "In Griswold everyone gets what they deserve. In Griswold everyone deserves the worst" (18). Rennie's sense of guilty complicity in this uninvited invasion is due to her faith in the protective powers of the Father's Law. Even when Lora is viciously assaulted (and raped?) by the uniformed guards Rennie steadfastly believes that a higher authority can give her succour. Looking to the father, she waits vainly for someone in authority to arrive. Eventually, it is her mother (literally) who tells her what to do and initiates Rennie's assumption of control over her self and her life. The very point that she must learn is that it is masculine authority that perpetrated this evil.

Rennie's involvement with the Father's symbolic order (of whom Jake is the paternal representative) fosters her sense of invisibility, of a lack of involvement. Subjected to (and by) his violating Word she refuses to take up the weapon used against her. (Indeed, Rennie is the *carrier* of this oppression in more ways than one: the box that she collects for Lora contains a machine gun.) According to Rennie "other people make statements, she just writes them down" (15). As she assumes the role of amanuensis, it is hardly surprising that Rennie herself becomes the inscriptional space on which the Father's Word is written: "Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper, she said. For you to doodle on" (105). Even her relationship to language displays a child-like acquiescence to masculine semantics: "'Remission' is the good word, 'terminal' is the bad one. It makes Rennie think of bus stations; the end of the line" (59). As a

journalist (not to mention as a woman) Rennie is completely unpoliticised. When Dr Minnow requests her active journalistic involvement, she is evasive and later resolutely uncompliant. His observation, however, that blood is news (134), has a disconcerting ring of truth. The masculine pen with which Rennie writes is dipped in the blood of the repressed other (Irigaray, *Spec*, 126), her own blood, though she will not acknowledge it. Bodily harm in one sphere is identical to that in another for the blood spilt is that the innocent; what Rennie must learn is that she is not the only victim of the disease of masculine exploitation. This complete realisation is, for her, a long time coming, but she is not totally obtuse. Following her second bodily invasion by Daniel, Rennie discovers the masculine meaning of one of the Father's terms:

She felt like a vacation, Daniel's, one he thought he shouldn't have taken. She felt like a straw that had been clutched, she felt he'd been drowning. She felt raped.  
 . . . This is what *terminal* means, she thought. Get used to it.  
 (238).

Her conscious acceptance of her exploited condition implies a narrative of feminine subjugation and oppression where hierarchised masculine control is reflected in the textual body. Whilst this is of course true on a contential basis, the text's form and structure belie masculine omnipotence. Although the feminine body sustains the injuries of dealings with the symbolic order, the text of the body resurfaces. In a superior analysis of the novel, Lorna Irvine notes that "recollected stories interfere with the forward narrative movement and even break up the written page. Like the dismembered bodies, the text itself seems repeatedly torn apart" (*Sub/version*, 45). This interpretation is certainly sustainable but it reinforces the debilitating effect of the masculine script upon the supine feminine body. I prefer to see the "progression" by narrative displacement as Rennie's own unconscious resistance to the unitary masculine narratives in which she is captive. Rennie herself is unwilling to make the requisite connections between her body and the body politic but her other self, her unconscious does. Thus, the very historiographical act inscribes her resistance by foregrounding the absence on which her understanding is based. Whether she knows it or not, Rennie is like the porno artist: she takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right?

Rennie's narrative represents the networking of a violated sensibility. The narrative and narrative breaks, like those of *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, work by association. The structure is that of dream logic (which may account for Rennie's own interest in the dreams of others). Significant words and phrases -- "*malignant, massive involvement, Oh please*" -- punctuate and/or rupture the text introducing a play of contextual resonances. In a novel that ostensibly proffers a straightforward narrative, the ambiguity of the origins of these italicised interruptions is in itself destabilising. Spatially, temporally, *Bodily Harm* does not yield to "the logic of reason", to he "who

listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance" (Irigaray, SØ, 103). It is the epitome of Atwood's textual practice, one in which words are put in *différent* contexts, "contexts that we don't ordinarily put them in" (O'Brien, 182). Rennie floats up to consciousness after her operation to confront the fatherly figure of Daniel who tells her that her cancer was malignant. He has saved her life but only through a brutal dismemberment. Like the doctor in Plath's poem, Daniel drags her back into a life she would rather not lead. Consequently, Rennie's contemplation of the word *malignant* connotes not only the cancerous growth she has spawned, but also Daniel's protective, "redemptive" act of disfiguration. To be seconded back into the world only to bear the symbolic mark of masculine castration is hardly a lucky break: "She's lucky. Why then doesn't she feel lucky?" (22). Therefore Rennie's awareness of her condition initiates a series of free associations, associations that unconsciously reflect the utilitarian way she has been *treated* by the Father's ministrations. Assured of her good fortune, because in others cancer "just pops up somewhere else", Rennie thinks of toasters. Told that quarter of her breast has been eaten up by cancer, she thinks of pies. According to Daniel, total mastectomies are only performed in the presence of massive involvement. Rennie's reply cements her belief in her political and social neutrality: "Massive involvement . . . It's never been my thing" (34).

Nevertheless, her narrative is as riddled with cancerous implications as her breast was with the disease; textual testimony to her deep-seated anxiety. Brushing the untrustworthy surface of her breast she contemplates her corporeal sterilisation. But Rennie no longer trusts the limits of her cleansed and proper body; like the airline sandwich she has consumed the whole affair has left its mark on the text and a bad taste in her mouth; the taste of "slightly rancid butter and roast beef, rotting meat" (49). Neither Atwood nor Rennie make explicit connections between these objects of decay; the association operates on a textual level, the level of language. Rennie's wordplays and eclectic associations demonstrate that the language of the men who treat her is not necessarily her language. Similarly, the language of *her* dreams is most assuredly not the dream language of the men she encounters. The Word and world of the Father, is, however, univocal; it operates on the premise that language is universal (as universal as the Oedipus complex is ahistorical). Rennie's text is therefore as disruptive of paternal logic as Irigaray's text is disruptive of that of the psychoanalytic father -- Lacan:

"The unconscious is structured like a language", he claims repeatedly. Obviously, but which? And if that language is unique, and always the same -- for women and men -- Lacan can only lead back to a traditional position concerning the feminine.  
(WE, 69)

Even though Rennie considers herself a fully-paid-up member of the symbolic clan (one that literally extracts a pound of flesh), her relation to language is not that of the Same.

Daniel's observation that "the mind isn't separate from the body" (82), is a touchstone of the novel. Rennie's violated feminine sensibility echoes through the body of her text.

Whilst Rennie may speak the language of men, her textual body cannot. The replies of those whom she questions about their dreams subtly convey this unconscious distinction. The ineffectual Daniel cannot remember (117); the sexist Jake metonymically dreams of sensual feminine bodily parts (117); the self-absorbed Paul dreams of his own death (249). Lora, however, proffers a different story. She dreams of her mother, of having a child, of creation. She dreams "lots of stuff" (281). *Just like Rennie*. Whilst the men in the novel are concerned with Oedipal anxieties -- sex and death -- the women do not participate in this binarism. Their concerns are multiple, heterogenous. Theirs is the specifically feminine imaginary evoked by Cixous (LM) and the "intolerable" possibility of a discourse of "contra-diction" evoked by Irigaray:

Always at least two, which never boil down to a binary alternative: the logic of distancing and the mastering of the other? What if they always spoke *many* at a time, without the many being reducible to the multiple of one?  
("The Language of Man", 197)

As Rennie's narrative so obviously foregrounds, theirs is the discourse of the repressed body in bits and pieces. Corporeal clues permeate the discursive membrane, with various rippling effects. Rennie's faceless stranger is cast as a figure in the board game, *Clue*: "Mr X, in the bedroom, with a rope" (41). Connotations of uninvited sexual assault disseminate into unusual contexts as Daniel tells Rennie that the medical profession has "a few clues" about cancer, but are still "looking for the X factor" (83). When he is described as "the absolutely ordinary raised to the degree of X" (196), his benign characterisation takes on a frightening aspect. Mr X, it would appear, is everywhere. His normality, coupled with his insistence that Rennie's feelings of powerlessness and infestation are normal, rings uncomfortably hollow when Rennie later discovers what "normal" really is.

Similarly, the cancerous connotations of *malignant* and *massive involvement* echo through her narrative, the latter initiating an immediate withdrawal from bodily contact. Involvement must be avoided at all costs, therefore, when Paul warns her away from emotional entanglement, "Rennie stops kissing. *Massive involvement*, she thinks" (234). The term resurfaces when Rennie contemplates the revolutionary body on St Agathe (252). She is terrified by another situation which is "way out of control" (253). The corporeal imposition and related powerlessness implied by this medical term is ultimately starkly evoked in a political context: Lora's pistolwhipping at the hands of the "doctorly" Morton and his assistant: "Her hair's all over, her skirt's up, her underpants ripped and filthy, bruises already appearing on the backs of her legs, the heavy flesh of her thighs, massive involvement" (296).<sup>5</sup> As Offred says, "Context is all" (*HT*, 154). In

the context of Rennie's tale, *malignant* comes to designate a cancer in the body politic, where massive involvement is a moral retribution brought upon oneself or a bloody and violent act perpetrated on innocent victims. In a scenario reminiscent of the opening section, Rennie is arrested by two policemen. As Rennie's previous recollections of morally righteous Griswold elicited a guilty sense of complicity, so her memory now is tinged with a vengeful (patriarchal) Griswoldian reminder: "The English woman looks at her, a look Rennie remembers from somewhere, from a long time ago, from a bad dream. It's a look of pure enjoyment. Malignant " (262). The pleasure derived from others' subjugation finds a corresponding outlet in the uniformed figure who revels in the physical and psychological torture of prison inmates. Rennie fears butchery but what occurs is "as precise as an operation" (289). This is merely the logical extension of personal cancerous bodily harm.

Pleasure and violence are inextricably linked. "*Oh please*" becomes a rhizomatic thread connoting not only a sexual *petit-mort* but also a plea for deliverance from psychological or physical death (49). But even the pleasure of sexual *jouissance* is disturbed by violent physical connotations: Rennie mistakes the woman's cries for those of agonised pain. (The episode recalls a similar vocalisation in *Surfacing*. Anna's disembodied voice is "a desperate beggar's whine" that culminates in a sound of "pure pain, clear as water, an animal's at the moment the trap closes" [82].) Not surprisingly, the re-emergence of this ambiguous fragment is contextualised as a cry for help. Disassociated from her body, from body language, Rennie is aware nevertheless of her own distress signals, of a corporeal Mayday:

She stroked the back of his neck and thought of the soul leaving the body in the form of words, on little scrolls like the ones in medieval paintings.  
*Oh please.*  
 (290)

It is of course the deaf and dumb man who initiates Rennie's epiphanic realisation of the illusory comfort of her own political exemption and of the pressing need for massive involvement. In direct unblinkered eye contact she is appealed to for deliverance from agony: "*Oh please*" (290). A hitherto feminine plea, in this instance it is a man seeking succour from her, victim to victim. Subjection to bodily harm is not a solely feminine domain.

The deaf and dumb man's discourse is that of hands and eyes; quite literally a body language. Whilst this is certainly not ineffective, Rennie's discourse is strengthened by her access to the Word. Her incarceration, however, is a means of silencing her voice, one that ironically only succeeds in strengthening it. At the conclusion of the novel, Rennie has become politicised; her promise to the representatives of Canadian neutrality is a lie. She will choose her time, we are told, and take up the Father's pen in a gesture

of defiance. That she cannot conceive of a name for her account signals not only her distance from paternal decree but also the irreducibility of her experience to a singular blanket term. Although this is projected into the future, the textual experience we have undergone to reach this point constitutes this very gesture; a gesture inscribed in the opening line: "This is how I got here, says Rennie" (11). Thus, the emergence of Rennie's story from the cell/cellar/underground challenges the authoritarian/masculine attempt to muffle her voice. In many ways, we have already arrived. Dr Minnow's observation that "for even one person to imagine is very dangerous to them" (229), is an understanding that Rennie finally shares. Indeed, her imaginings constitute the subversive form of the novel itself:

She switches to a jigsaw puzzle, in her head. The top border, the ones with the flat edges, it's always the sky, one piece fits into another, fits into another, interlocking, pure blue.  
(280)

Hers is an imaginary puzzle with the unusual quality of a multiplicity of possible permutations and splayed out truths. Asked to maintain her silence and remain disempowered Rennie finally realises the true meaning of normality: "The situation is normalizing, all over the place, it's getting more and more normal all the time" (296). She has, however, a much more pertinent feminine loyalty (one which accompanies her newly discovered faith in herself) and "Wherever else she's going it will not be *quietly* under" (my emphasis, 300). Her renewed faith is emphasised by a new and feminised relation to language. The *massive involvement* of the novel, with its masculine associations of cancer, violation and exposure, becomes finally a positive feminised gesture of participation. Passivity is rejected, as *massive involvement* is transformed from something one undergoes to something one *does*. Rennie is often unbelievably naive, but it's not terminal. At the conclusion of the novel this death-ridden term is defined not only as an endpoint but also one of departure (299). Just as Rennie re-enters her alienated body, so she re-enters the symbolic order of language with a feminised semantic usage and awareness. *Bodily Harm* is a feminine imaginary, a force that Cixous claims will constitute "a new history" (LM, 253). Committing herself to discourse, Rennie will appropriate his Word to revolutionary effect. Rennie is "a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter" (301).

Offred's tale reflects a similar sense of feminine dis-ease and also, ultimately, a subversive report on experience. Here, the metaphorical recognition of a masculine linguistic bastion is reproduced to the very letter: "He has something we don't have, he has the word" (HT, 99). Description, depiction, representation, are in the masculine hands, and men are the veritable priests of symbolic interpretation. Patrilinear descent is assured, since the handmaids bear the name of the Father in more ways than one. The Gileadean regime is only a futuristic continuation of the *bio-power* that marks our own



social history: "Broadly speaking, at the juncture of the "body" and the "population", sex became a crucial target of a power organized around *the management of life* rather than the menace of death" (Foucault, 147, my emphasis). It is a management of life, however, that results in the systematic suppression of the feminine ability to name and regulate one's own life. Life brokerage is assuredly not universally beneficial. Offred's contemplation of her just-as-unknown (dead) predecessor cements the equation of symbolic erasure with that of death. A room of one's own is merely another prison, a ghetto, a coffin: "I feel buried", she despairingly says (223). This conditional silence is not only that of the handmaids but also that of every woman under this regime.<sup>6</sup> The power of the word is ironically evoked in Offred's description of her miserable mistress: "She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (56). Freud's contentious identification of the "universal" feminine trait is re-contextualised and ironically reaffirmed: "I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains . . . I envy the Commander his pen" (196). Between *her* fingers, however, the pen is tactile, "sensuous", "almost alive". Taking the implement of his Word does not necessarily mean slavish fidelity to his disembodied script; indeed the Commander's pen is "one more thing [she] would like to *steal*" (my emphasis, 196). In *his* hands, the pen confers an archetypal paternity. Described as "positively Daddyish" (193), he has an infantilising effect. Unable to avoid the command of his desires, Offred is summoned to his study; her subsequent feelings of a child-like presentation for paternal inspection only reinforce the powerlessness of the feminine in this economy: "I feel as if my feet . . . aren't quite touching the floor . . . I think I should have a hat on, tied with a bow under my chin" (148). Although Offred's treatment at the Commander's hands is nothing more than institutionalised rape, her bodily confinement does not find a psychological counterpart. In *Bodily Harm*, another Son of Jacob -- Jake -- proffers a comment that illuminates the irrepressibility of the feminine psyche: "You can't rape a woman's mind without her consent, you know that" (*BH*, 104). Thus, Offred's description of the burgeoning life of Serena Joy's garden signals a specifically feminine response to masculine suppression: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (161). This response is both physically and imaginatively tactile. It is "a Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*" (161). The garden speaks a prohibited, archaic language of "insinuating whispers": "*Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*. . . " (161). A language of feminine *jouissance* as tangible sibilant touch not only Offred but the body of her text: "The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs . . . " (161). The very air is "suffuse[d] with desire" (162). Thus Offred *confronts* the discourse that would make of her a palimpsest, and refuses the Orwellian Newspeak of the Gileadean economy. She introduces a pleasure and discourse of an ex-

centric nature, one that according to Irigaray is not exclusive but un(self)consciously inclusive:

You may perhaps be able to see that when one starts from the "two lips" of the female sex, the dominant discourse finds itself baffled: there can no longer be a unity in the subject, for instance. There will always therefore be a plurality in feminine language. And it will not even be the Freudian "pun", i.e., a superimposed hierarchy of meaning, but the fact that at each moment there is always for women, "at least two" meanings, without one being able to decide which meaning prevails, which is "on top" or "underneath", which "conscious" or "repressed".  
(Irigaray, WE, 65)

A language of difference; a language of *différance*; a discourse that inscribes "the chaosmos of the "personal"" (Cixous, LM, 258).

Thus, different kinds of bodily communication are established, transgressing a Law that reserves no place for the body's corporeality and carnality. Ironically, the public punishment of these criminal deeds only serves to disseminate a subversive word: "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of after all" (287). Offred herself affirms the heartening benefits of carnivalesque profanation. "*Aunt Lydia sucks*," is "like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion" (234). With a deflating parodic conception, Offred undercuts the formal pomp and ceremony of the marital service:

"So now I imagine, among these Angels and their drained white brides, momentous grunts and sweating, damp furry encounters; or, better, ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumbblings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish.  
(234)

Her grotesque evocation of supposed phallic power nevertheless suggests its alienating effect on the feminine body. Refusing this power, Offred brings to language a piercing sensuality, one that embodies an incredibly provocative (feminine) power: "You can wet the rim of a glass and run your finger around the rim and it will make a sound. This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word *shatter*. I want to be with someone" (113). Playing illicit games of Scrabble, Offred rolls the Word over in her mouth, savouring the knowledge of forbidden fruits: "The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious" (149). But sensuous materiality is not the only effect of linguistic feminisation. Like Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, Offred's tale is a narrative of associative connections:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.  
(120)

She may deny the symbolic and thematic rhizomes of her "litanies" but the connections are obviously there. Subjected to the word of a Biblical chairman, Rennie survives in a world virtually devoid of charity. In the Gileadean order she is merely a fleshly vessel -- a hunk of meat -- who is symbolically and pragmatically executed by the Birthchair in which she delivers her child. And of course the passage offers a multitude of other possible connections, because for women there are always *at least* two meanings 'without one being able to decide . . . which is "on top" or "underneath"' (Irigaray, WE, 65).

Offred's language, like her *jouissance*, is *fluid*, recalling the pre-Oedipal pleasures of a semiotic space. Her discourse refutes the substance of the paternal logos, the enclosure by the One, and foregrounds the absent body on which His text is written. Irigaray's discussion of the mechanics of fluids bears testimony to this feminine textual effect:

The fluid will always spill over reason, *ratio*, go beyond measure, plunge back into the undifferentiated; a universe of myths and magic, a night resisting the lucidity of the philosophers who will only approach it to re-inclose it within the shores of their thought. Forgetting that, without fluidity, their thought would have no possible unity, that fluid always subsists between solid substances to pin them, to re-unite them. Without the intervention of fluids, no discourse would *hold together*.  
("The Language of Man", 199)

Although Offred wishes her tale were "more civilized", less "in fragments", less "distracted by trivia" (279), her narrative "holds together" due to this very fluid asociality. (Considering the historians' exasperation with these very textual effects, Offred's identification of her tale's "speculation[s]" and related "gossip that cannot be verified" is surely dramatically ironic.) Unwilling to emulate patrilinear narrative and a concern with objective Truth, Offred's text is, paradoxically, more truthful. Unlike conventional historiographers, Offred frequently emphasises the reconstructive nature of her personal history. Claiming she no longer wishes to relate a story that pains her, her narrative falters into submissive resignation. Assuring herself (and us) of the inappropriateness of this attitude, she recommences with talk of love: "That's better. That's something I know about" (237). Relating her first liaison with Nick, she proffers two different versions and concludes that neither is exactly right (275). Such narrative "lapses" frustrate the lucidity sought by the historicising philosophers of the concluding section, whose will to Truth is resoundingly deconstructed. The obvious point, for me, is not Offred's unreliability as a narrator but the unreliability of any narrative that seeks to represent historical and temporal truth. And Offred's interpolated memories only reinforce this temporal fluidity, for they are triggered by "trivial" events in Offred's daily life. Whilst they necessarily flesh out Offred's current situation, they also present a play of ironic echoes and effects. A recollected conversation with Moira following the first wave of the new regime conflates a maternal maxim with proven accuracy of prediction:

"Look out . . . Here it comes . . . . It's you and me up against the wall, baby" (183). The phrase connotes the revolutionary eradication of political dissidents but also ironically prefigures the alternatives that Moira and Offred will be offered: institutionalised prostitution or death. Similarly, Offred's observation that love has been ignored by the New Order is greeted by the Commander's complacent appeal to the law of the jungle --- "Nature's norm" (232) -- and the interpolated memory of Aunt Lydia's systematic repression of this expedient historical anomaly: "*Love*, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls . . . . *Love* is not the point" (232). The buried presence here, of Offred's own true name, emphasises the Gileadean erasure not only of an emotion constitutive of humanity, but also of the handmaids themselves.

But Offred's narrative is testimony to her power of feminine resurrection, a power that is signalled from the novel's outset: "In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order our dresses. Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break" (34). Forced into the uniform(ity) of the Gileadean economy, Offred wears the insignia of submission to the Father's law. Her wry pun, however, emphasises her attachment to linguistic and social autonomy of her previous life, a habit that she cannot, and will not, abandon. And Offred's habitual resistance flows through her narrative; a subversive undercurrent that undermines the Word that imprisons her. Piously informed that she is a precious pearl, Offred deconstructs the metaphoricity of this term. Since "pearls are congealed oyster spit", Aunt Lydia's cheerful resolution "to lick you into shape" is subversively re-contextualised (124). A monologic discourse is proffered repetitively for public consumption and the handmaids themselves are drilled in His Word. The obvious tedium it provokes is emphasised by the disembodied (mechanised) voice of a masculine Holy Roller. But listening to the Beatitudes, Offred is aware that the Word is not perfect. Barred from the means of proving the accuracy of her reading she does not abandon her mental *cuntention*: "*Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted*. Nobody said when" (100). The efficacy of the Biblical offering is thus contradicted by the reality of the order it underwrites. Offred's deconstructive reading includes one of the main texts of patriarchal religion: The Lord's Prayer. With personal interpolation she disrupts the formal basis of a conventionally monologic prayer. Directly addressing her God -- not "Our Father" -- Offred opens the way for a dialogue prohibited in Gileadean prostrations: "You must be feeling pretty ripped off. I guess it's not the first time" (205). Her God is not a vengeful figure since "Hell we can make for ourselves" but one whose real withheld name is as hallowed as her own. In the light of Offred's own experience, temptation and forgiveness have an ambiguous, shifting application. Even her agenda of priorities reveals the urgency of her personal appeal: "I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that. It isn't the main problem. The

problem is getting it down without choking on it" (204). Hers is a transgression of proper boundaries for she engages the Lord of the Fathers in direct and personal conversation, registering only a conditional acceptance of Biblical decree. In the secular realm, Offred appropriates the paternal Word to form a silent chant of protest. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* becomes a feminised talisman of sexual and psychical specificity, a language she traces "with the ends of [her] fingers, as if it's a code in Braille" (156). A language she can touch, but one that must remain hidden, secret, underground. As Offred says, however, "whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard" (161).

In reading her narrative we should therefore be aware not only of the manifest content of her text but also the latent content. Since the novel opens with a litany of erased women's names the reader is challenged to connect these titles with their owners. All can be accounted for except the last: June. Offred's insistent interest in forbidden love in the face of Aunt Lydia's warning against "mooning and June-ing" (232), only reinforces the likelihood of this possibility. Even the variety of interpretations offered by her designation in the Gileadean text suggests the subversive possibilities inherent in His Word. Offred's fidelity to this regime is certainly way *off-centre*; the text we are *offered* catalogues a network of feminine resistance. As a committed writer/reporter (and autonomous sexual initiator) she breaks all the "vows" of the handmaidens' service -- she is *off-red*. By the historians, however, firmly fixed in the circle of the phallogocentric damned, she is sadly *off-read*. Their refusal to accept the validity of her story, or to acknowledge the importance of the information that she offers, is the denial of a force that would disrupt their whole enterprise. Irigaray describes the threat embodied in Offred's text: "if one day her sexuality was recognised, if it did enter into 'History', then his-story would no longer take place or have a place to take" (*Spec*, 112). Professor Pieixoto is blinded by his own sexist self-importance and will to masculine truth. The obviously ironic intent of "The Historical Notes" makes it clear that *our* reading should not be so obscured or securely complacent.

The relentless exposure of the inability of univocal (masculine) language to adequately account for feminine experience is not, in Atwood's texts, an isolated occurrence. In "Squaw Lilies: Some Notes" (1985-6: *SPH*, 170-1), a feminine speaker contemplates the three Adamic names of a certain flower. Given the reason that fuels this identification, at least two of the terms are explicitly derogatory. An abjected *odor di femina* is connoted in the olfactory evocation of "red meat going off", a stink that is subsequently related to a feminine term. Like Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, the speaker experiences a profound sense of alienation from a hitherto comfortable existence: "Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she'd been used to thinking of as reality" (210). In this case, the speaker actually becomes the scriptural basis for a pornographic image:

When she said that I felt as if painted  
naked on an off-blue sofa  
by a bad expressionist, ochre  
and dirty greens, lips thickened with yellow  
pigment, a red-infected  
crevice dividing the splayed legs.

Hers is the infected crevice of red meat; hers is the body of the landscape: "Subject to depiction." Both she and Nature must suffer these adjectives, these representations, but she seeks their liberation: "release the lilies. They have nothing / to do with these names for them." The inaccuracy of these names is only strengthened by the speaker's dry observation that they are not even lilies. Thus, even a scanty feminine notation acknowledges more than a bevy of Adamic designations. The fact that the speaker descends from the mount without mishap only reinforces her linguistic triumph. The equally self-contained painter Yvonne in "Sunrise" (*BE*), holds the falsity of language in similar contempt. (And interestingly enough, the representation that she is concerned with is that of men. Uninterested in "varnished, impermeable" surfaces [242], however, Yvonne is concerned with the depths of their souls [243].) Arising each morning to greet the sun, Yvonne considers the *sunrise* as "an accident of the language", "a fraud" (261). For her, visual art says more than a fraudulent linguistic system ever could. She wants a "language of images" (247).

*Cat's Eye* also employs the language of images in a text that not only disrupts the secular and religious Word in feminist re-vision, but also disrupts the historicising and dramatic world of master narrators. The concern with art and artistry -- with painterly vision -- that is signalled so frequently in Atwood's work is here given full fictional rein. Elaine Risley's narrative is not only the retrospective vision of memory but also the vision of her art: word and image are, in *Cat's Eye*, rhizomatically interwoven. Elaine's art is a response to her treatment in an economy governed by the Law of the Father. Although she is oppressed by her own sex, the paternal cause of her victimisation is progressively revealed. Whilst the fathers are, more often than not, absent, their influence reverberates throughout the narrative. Indeed, *Cat's Eye* picks up and continues the rhizomatic threads established in many of Atwood's other texts. In a text devoted to fluid temporal effects and the process of artistic creation, the surfacing tendrils/echoes of previous narratives are both rich and appropriate.

*Cat's Eye* opens with the same signalling of a past traumatic event that characterised the exposition of *Surfacing*. Returning to her native Toronto, Elaine Risley feels the same deathly paralysis and counters its anaesthetic effect with a previously habitual self-inflicted bodily harm. In a city that she hates, surrounded by sky-scrappers "like enormous gravestones of cold light" (8), Elaine feels "[her] throat tightening" and tells us "I've started to chew my fingers again" (9). Her fingers, not her nerveless fingernails. The following narrative reveals the origins of this painful habit in a catalogue of

childhood acts of sado-masochism. In "the endless time" (113) of her disempowered adolescence, Elaine secretly and deliberately mutilated herself. Peeling her feet, she claims, gave her a distracting sense of security, "something definite to think about", "something to hold onto" (114). The security she seeks gives death an increasing appeal. Even when temporarily freed from her anaesthetised hellish existence in Toronto, the woods of Northern Ontario provide a reminder of a constant attraction. Finding a dead raven, Elaine comments that "No matter what I do to it, it won't feel a thing. No one can get at it"(144). Her liberation is only transitory for her dreams are still suffused with the anxiety that has become a way of life (145). Back in the city her body reverts to its customary state: "Already my body is stiffening, emptying itself of feeling. The future is closing on me like a door" (154). Her fascination with suicide is both frightening and a tempting placatory offering to the demon who possesses her: "I hear [Cordelia's] kind voice inside my head. *Do it. Come on*" (155). Elaine's abuse of her body thus becomes the retaliatory use of her alienated body to escape both Cordelia and an endless temporal endurance: "Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you" (171).<sup>7</sup>

The evil from which Elaine is intent on escaping comes in the form of Cordelia's "friendly" ministrations. Cordelia is the ringleader of a trio who initiate Elaine into the mysteries of the feminine, a process of "uni-formalization" that, as Lorraine York notes, begins in childhood (10). Therefore, like the narrator in *Surfacing*, Elaine diligently cuts and pastes the images of domesticated femininity (53), and mouths the requisite self-deprecations. Unused to this alien behaviour, Elaine feels as if she is "only doing an imitation of a girl" (52). (Textually juxtaposed with her own upbringing, the activity is subtly deconstructed. The Eaton's Catalogues that are now treated with such reverence have a much less privileged usage in Elaine's own experience: that of toilet paper [53].) Yet the attainment of this state of Grace is characterised by the suppression of disorder and submission to another's authoritarian stance (53). How to act -- the question that pervades the novel, and appropriately enough, the characterisation of the main antagonist. Cordelia is well versed in the appropriate "rituals" (208), but even in her later teens Elaine feels they are "impenetrable and fraudulent, and [she] can't do them without feeling [she's] acting" (209). But Elaine must play the (gender) role that she has been assigned and she is aided in her efforts by the Three Witches/Graces, those girls who are frequently and ironically referred to as her best friends. They are, of course, her keepers, even her captors, as Elaine is trapped behind the mirror that they hold up to her. Not only intent on forming and controlling her mind, they also aspire to forming and controlling her appearance. Accordingly, Cordelia thrusts a mirror up to Elaine's disembodied face, disgusted at the ravaged aspect she presents: "Look at yourself! Just look!" (158). For Elaine, the mirror stage is no "jubilant assumption" (Lacan, 2). (Her

experience is that of the women described in "Solstice Poem" [1978: *SPH*, 37-40]; women who are entrapped in the contemporary events of a negative fairy tale: "Each has a mirror / which when asked replies Not you.") Elaine must conform to the rules and the appearance of the rigid social code. She is subjected to the constant corrective surveillance of these Big Sisters, these representatives of the Father's Law. Cordelia's own investment in the presumed feminine requisite rebounds on all her adolescent relationships. Assuming the mask of adulthood, she succeeds only in confusing the not-as-yet men that she encounters. Subjecting herself to this Symbolic ideal in an attempt to please, she presents a rather pathetic inauthenticity: "She's mimicking something, some role or image that only she can see" (244). Whilst Elaine is aware of this projected imagery, this self-surveillance, Cordelia's influence has been formative; throughout the novel she is constantly assailed by the ever-present threat of disapproving scrutiny.

Elaine's experience is quite literally the fall from Innocence into a (self) violating Knowledge. Hers is a Paradisal, genderless childhood lost: "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (21). Any subsequent return to this underworld is like being "dragged downwards . . . into liquefied mud" (13), a descent "through layers of clarity" into darkness (68). Thus far, Elaine has never had to contend with the strictures of paternal Law, but further progression along this undifferentiated path is abruptly arrested. Viewed as a kind of alien "primitive" (49), Elaine is swiftly introduced to the obligatory socio-symbolic contract.<sup>8</sup> As her first educational experience demonstrates, the entry to this order is different for boys and girls: "I am very curious about the BOYS door. How is going in through a door different if you're a boy? What's in there that merits the strap just for seeing it? . . . They go in the BOYS door and end up in the same place we do . . . the door baffles me" (46). Very quickly Elaine learns where the difference lies. Under the corrective tutelage of her best friends she learns that she is "not normal . . . not like other girls" (118). Repeatedly punished for a host of minor or fabricated infidelities, she feels the force of these true father's daughters: "Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute . They are life-sized" (118). Their play is a farce of parenthood. In this respect (let alone Cordelia's name) *King Lear* echoes through *Cat's Eye*, but the body of *that* narrative is, in Atwood's text, ignored. Instead, Atwood concentrates on the ludicrous nature of Lear's initial question and its violent and bloody aftermath. Like Lear, Cordelia relentlessly emphasises the importance of words, of verbalisation, of *saying*, but Elaine, like the daughter in Shakespeare's text, cannot heave her heart into her mouth. Unable to be true to both her father and herself, the Father's Word reduces her to silence: "*What do you have to say for yourself?* Cordelia used to ask. *Nothing*, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (41). *King Lear*'s fatherly admonition is a constant illuminating background to this tragic scenario: "Nothing will come of



nothing. Speak again" (I.i, 90). This connection with nothing periodically resurfaces to wash over her like a wave: "Whatever is happening to me is my own fault. I have done something wrong, something so huge I can't even see it, something that's drowning me. I am inadequate and stupid, without worth. I might as well be dead" (372). Although the breakdown of her marriage to Jon -- a man who initially offered the freedom of a second childhood -- is a shared failure, Elaine is assailed by previously experienced feelings of guilt at her own wrong-doing. Such is the lingering power of Cordelia's Law. (On the one occasion when Elaine *does* inadvertently express her own feelings in laughter, this carnivalesque transgression of Cordelia's royal limits is rewarded with a swift and traumatic reprisal: her exile to the world under the bridge [186].) Another Shakespearean text raises an ambiguous echo. Fingering children's plaid dresses in a department store triggers another childhood recollection for Elaine. Fragments from *Macbeth* connect the "little girls" of her past with the witches on the heath and the hard-heartedness of Lady Macbeth. Plaid, the colours of "despair, slaughter, treachery and murder" (113). Elaine herself is implicitly cast as the tragic protagonist. Yet the symbolic resonances evoke the play's crucial question: Was *Macbeth* responsible for his own fate or was his course pre-ordained? In Atwood's text, as in Shakespeare's, the question remains unanswered.

Elaine's treatment at the hands of this gang of three is, I believe, a displaced projection of the latters' own treatment at the hands of their fathers. Although they are infrequently mentioned, they are described as a looming ever-present threat (48; 73). The Law of the absent Father underwrites the text and regulates the behaviour of his dutiful daughters. Even the invocation of his Name is enough to elicit the requisite effect (210). In a comment that recalls Irigaray's metaphor of masculine vampirism (*Spec*, 125-6), Elaine establishes the violent paternal characteristic and the exemption of her own father from this rule: "All fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers. But fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real unspeakable power. There is more to them than meets the eye. And so we believe the belt" (164). A real unspeakable power: the power of the veiled phallus. Elaine's own home life is in marked contrast to those of her playmates. Dinners at Cordelia's house take two distinct forms: those governed by the father's presence and those by his absence. The former is regimentally formal and ordered, an occasion when "even the spines are straighter" (249); the latter (feminine) occasion is "slapdash", decidedly unorganised, one in which everyone "talks all at once" and appearances are unimportant (249). In a series of brief symbolic glimpses the reason for Elaine's victimisation is brought to light (and the pattern of mirrored experience strengthened). Although it is Elaine who descends to the depths of the grave-like hole, it was Cordelia who dug it seeking safety:

"I guess I wanted some place that was all mine, where nobody could bug me. . . [where] I would be safe. . . When I was really little, I guess I used to get into trouble a lot, with Daddy. When he lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it. 'Wipe that smirk off your face,' he would say."  
(252)

And "Wipe that smirk off your face" is exactly what Cordelia demands of Elaine (171). In the father's presence Cordelia is submissive putty in his hands; in his absence she is the representative of his Law. Again, *King Lear* bears ironically on the text. Power is conferred upon the fawning daughter(s) whilst Lear says "Only we shall retain / The name and all th'addition of a king . . . (I.i, 135-6). Mimicking his authority, Cordelia subjects others to her own experience of victimisation.

But Cordelia is not the only preacher of His Word. Elaine's first encounter with religion has a formative psychological (and artistic) influence. The illuminated windows of the church hold an awe-inspiring fascination and the similarly illuminated Word of Biblical Law has an equally symbolic effect: THE•KINGDOM•OF•GOD•IS•WITHIN•YOU is directly translated in Elaine's text in images of revealed hearts; in the context of her experience, SUFFER•THE•LITTLE•CHILDREN is a literal description of the effect of paternal power; THE•GREATEST•OF•THESE•IS•CHARITY is, like the contents of Pandora's box, the final glimmer of hope amongst a myriad of unleashed evils. Suffering the consequences of the former terms, Elaine needs to recognise the validity of the latter. The Word is not necessarily all Bad News. For the most part, however, it is not beneficial and it is significant that this episode occurs in a section of the novel entitled "Deadly Nightshade". The attraction is that of blissful inclusion in the symbolic clan. As Elaine is schooled in the appropriate verbal rituals she feels "taken in. God loves me, whoever he is (99). In the light of Elaine's subsequent experience she *is* taken in. Duped. She is betrayed by a trinity of Judases; buried alive. Cordelia's hole is the passage to the underworld and she is the Charonesque ferryman. Thus, Elaine's memory is that of darkness, of nothing, a blank square denoting the "point at which [she] lost power" (106). Like the speaker's address to her ghoulish lover in *Power Politics*, her relationship with a paternal representative is a deathly dangerous one:

your mouth is nothingness  
where it touches me I vanish

you descend on me like age  
you descend on me like earth  
("I look up"; *SP*, 174)

Following the revelation of Mrs Smeath's complicity in this (paternal) punishment -- "He's on her side, and it's a side from which I'm excluded" (181) -- Elaine loses confidence in God: "God is not Our Father at all. My image of him now is of something huge, hard, inexorable, faceless and moving forwards as if on tracks" (181). This mechanistic, alienating image carries an intense negativity. In defiance of this religion,

one in which the worship of the Holy Mother is considered "scandalous" (182), Elaine resolves to offer her prayers to the Virgin Mary. Knowing such a course of action is "dangerous, rebellious" she nevertheless conjures an imaginative picture of her object, in prayers that are significantly "wordless" and "defiant" (183). Abandoning the rote prayers of the Father's order, her appeal is couched in the language of images. An experience with deadly nightshade can also reveal a positive aspect. As the speaker says of the plant in "Nightshade On The Way To School" (1985-6: *SPH*, 156-7): "*Belladonna* was its name, *beautiful lady*." Implicitly, the vision that she receives (and the subsequent visitation, a *deus ex machina*), fuels a new and "blasphemous" attitude (183). It allows her to turn the tables of divine wrath upon her oppressors, specifically Cordelia. Elaine quietly assumes the role in which she was cast to return to Cordelia a taste of her own bitter medicine. Her symbolic internment produces a malevolent resurrection as Elaine calmly informs an increasingly disquieted Cordelia that she is a vampire. Friendly protestation is countered with friendly protestation: "I have a coffin full of earth where I sleep . . . . You're my friend, I thought it was time you knew. I'm really dead. I've been dead for years" (233).<sup>9</sup> In the exchange Elaine regains some of the power she has lost. Elaine's has been a painful road to uneasy knowledge but it has founded her rejection of an insufferable Word. Cordelia, however, cannot abandon her investment in a paternal economy and she continues desperately to attempt his appeasement: "But . . . she's too frightened of [her father] . . . How can she be so abject? When will she learn?" (249). The reversal only serves to highlight Cordelia's and Elaine's uneasy sisterhood.

Of course, Elaine's is neither a conclusive nor complete rejuvenation. As the textual echoes continually reinforce, she is never wholly free of Cordelia's formative power. Although her childhood is characterised by wordless participation -- she always has nothing to say -- her narrative is, like Offred's, the voice of the silenced. And, like the text of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* is concerned with the effects of the unconscious and of time. Even more than the previous text, *Cat's Eye* is a rhizomatic dream work as Elaine oscillates between time present and time past with remembrances triggered by minor daily occurrences. (The typography of the text emphasises this fugal movement.) In an opening statement that echoes Stephen Hawking's epigraph (and also *Surfacing's* narrator's redemptive dive), Elaine establishes the symbolic and structural form of her narrative: "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (3). Elaine's temporal location in mid-life is destabilised by the suggestion that her development was arrested in childhood. Her wavering belief in her present comfortable life is balanced by another much firmer conception: "that everyone else my age is an adult, whereas I am merely in disguise" (14). Her return to Toronto is couched as a descent into Hell but it is also a descent into the murky depths of her (suppressed)

memory. Hers is the Mephistophelean attitude of the imprisoned handmaid: "Though this is time, nor am I out of it" (*HT*, 47). Elaine is locked in to nine years old (400), yet, like the narrator in *Surfacing*, she is constantly suppressing the events of that period. What Elaine must do, and does, is immerse herself in these traumatic memories, relive them in order to free herself from the past.

It is an imperative that she unconsciously recognises, hence the proliferation of recollections that punctuate the narrative. Not all, however, escape the censorship of her protective consciousness. Attempting to recoup the experience of her terrifying burial, the point at which it all went wrong, she draws only a blank. "I need to fill in the blank square of time" she says, but the picture she receives seems unrelated to the time she wishes to explore: an image of nightshade. The traumatic memory of her symbolic death has been effectively blocked. Although Elaine claims that it is "the wrong memory" (108), the image is an unconscious signalling of the deadly nature of this experience and a textual echo (and pre-echo) of its poisonous effects. Read in conjunction with Atwood's earlier poem "Nightshade On The Way To School" (1985-6: *SPH*, 156-7), the reminiscence is an illuminating one: "The word *Nightshade* a shadow, / the colour of a recurring dream / in which you cannot see colour." The initial identification of its heart-stopping effect is, however, countered by a subsequent beneficence: "Sometimes it was used for healing, / or in the eyes. I learned that later." Thus, the symbol of Elaine's obscured recollective vision is something that, in the course of the novel, becomes one of restorative visual power. Immersing herself in her memories, Elaine gains a much clearer vision.

Following her release from the power of Cordelia's Word (significantly echoed by the death of the King [200]), Elaine rejects both the memory and even the recognition of those bad times: "I am happy as a clam: hard shelled, firmly closed" (201). She is detached, alienated from emotion (207 ff). Burying the trauma under layers of self-control, the sight of the bridge only elicits a vaguely "uneasy feeling" (202). But nothing stays down forever and her unresolved anxieties surface in the subjects of her art. Her very denial of knowledge of their childhood origins, and of her connections with them, constitutes an unconscious displacement: "They arrive detached from any context . . . suffused with anxiety, but it's not my own. The anxiety is in the things themselves" (337). Her own experience of going through the wringer returns in the form of a washing machine, its wringer painted "a disturbing fleshtone pink" (337). Three sofas quickly follow, the central sofa bearing a disproportionately large egg-cup with its jagged and broken contents. The sofas are those of her "best friends" whose beckoning comfort is of a destructive order. It is therefore appropriate to discover later that the painting is called *Three Witches* (348). Missing time is returning as "Mrs Smeath floats up without warning" leading to a whole painterly series that multiplies with bacterial intensity (338).

Although Elaine will not own it, the images are a *jouissance* of revenge, the text of her suppressed unconscious. Associated with her own unsought pregnancy, Elaine's pictures recall a Barthesian assertion: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas -- for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (Barthes, 17). Elaine's narrative oscillates between this pleasure and its suppression, implicitly terrified that the pool of memory is one in which she might drown. She therefore counters these resurrections from the depths with the imperatives of her own childhood games: "*You're dead. Lie down*" (24; 414). Just as Elaine cannot remain comfortably in time present, so Cordelia will not remain in the grave to which Elaine has consigned her. Her efforts to resist the fluidity of memory only intensify it: she is haunted by a demanding and cannibalistic spectre: "We've rejected that easy flow between dimensions: we want the dead unmentionable, we refuse to name them, we refuse to feed them. Our dead as a result are thinner, greyer, harder to hear and hungrier" (387). Unlike the memorial festivals of Mexican culture, Elaine refuses to set a place for the dead, for absent friends. Now it is *Cordelia* who has become *her* vampire. Nothing stays down forever.

If the pattern of resemblances between Cordelia and Elaine is not enough to establish them as sister souls, then the novel's first epigraph makes this connection abundantly clear. Images of blood and especially death pepper the text. The connections occur in Elaine's frequent dreams and the surrealist images of her art: "I dream that my mother has had a baby, one of a set of twins. The baby is grey. I don't know where the other twin is" (166). Obviously doubles, the seeming interchangeability of roles precludes any identification of good and evil aspects of one personality. Unlike the simplicity of the horror comic they read (211), the *doppelgänger* motif is evoked and just as relentlessly destabilised. The ravaged aspect of the burned twin's face in the story recalls Elaine's face in an earlier episode, but it is also connected with Cordelia in Elaine's painting of her -- *Half a Face* (227) -- and her appearance in the brief section entitled "Leprosy". Betrayal and cannibalism collude in the girls' parody of a popular song: "*Part of your heart, / That's what I'm eating now, / Too bad we had to part . . .*" (229). Cordelia's desperate unspoken appeal to Elaine is one she cannot emotionally respond to, and the forlorn evocation of these once witty songs takes on a symbolic resonance in the concluding chapter (258). Now it is Cordelia who is implicitly betrayed; Cordelia who is the deserted leprous victim. The Gothic formulae of the horror comic story, however, is another rhizomatic thread in Elaine's narrative. They *are* twins in the mirror of the conventional symbolic plot, oscillating and destructive reflections of each other. (But only *Cordelia* is hung.) They may be sisters but theirs is the inverse of goods getting together: "How can this merchandise relate to other goods on the market other than with aggressive jealousy?" (Irigaray, "When the Goods Get Together", 105)

The mirror of the Father's Word reduces them to nothing, to silence, to anti-narcissism. Elaine's much earlier contemplation of Jon's theatrical props for horror movies also forms a symbolic textual rhizome: "Also there's part of a face, with the skin blackened and withered, made to fit over the actor's real face. *A monster warped by others, bent on revenge*" (18, my emphasis). The mirror must be broken and Elaine's painting of Cordelia is indeed testimony to a pervasive feminine horror story. Her previous fascination with the background mirror in the *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait* is here translated and transformed. In *Half a Face* this mirror is replaced by a draped face, "a theatrical mask" (227). The "perhaps" that she adds to this observation raises connotations of the tragic decapitation of Macbeth<sup>10</sup> and the death mask of Greek drama. Assuming the part of a symbolic player is tantamount to accepting the mask of death. And both Cordelia and Elaine have been *burned* by this economy. Intent on capturing Cordelia's thirteen-year-old belligerent defiance, she can only reflect the gaze of reproach and fear.<sup>11</sup> The descriptive imagery forms a cluster of intertextual threads as the twin sisters' roles reverse and reverse again in an evocative *danse macabre*:

Cordelia is afraid of me in this picture.  
I am afraid of Cordelia.  
I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia.  
Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when.  
(227)

Indeed, the two women's experience forms a pattern of distorted mirror images: a tragic reflected story. According to Cordelia, desertion is the prime motivation for suicide (74), and her childhood resolution haunts her own unaccounted-for attempt (358). Therefore, when things aren't "working out too well" with Jon, Elaine introduces her own destructive cutting edge. Deserted, and in wintry darkness, she succumbs to an assertion that "has the force of an order" (373). Interestingly enough, "the angel of suicide" (1985-6: *SPH*, 157-8) has the voice of a nine year old child: "*Do it. Come on. Do it*" (373). Finally, having imaginatively relived and therefore regained her lost past, Elaine recognises the doubled pattern of their lives and the need for separation and explanation. What they can give each other is not a mirrored image but the gift of accurate reflection: "This is the part of herself I could give back to her" (411). Appropriately, if paradoxically, Cordelia is needed to complete the picture: "We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (411). Elaine needs to discover the "why" that is contained in her very own narrative: the destructive effects of the Father's Law; one that Elaine herself has long ago rejected. Adherence to this Law is what has driven Cordelia into madness as the dutiful daughter is framed in her father's own kingly image. Voluntarily exiling herself from His influence, Elaine has survived; remaining under His compass, Cordelia's exile has been more complete.

In "Sunrise" (BE), Yvonne responds to colour and light with psychological and emotional intensity. Her desire for a "language of images" (247) is one fulfilled by Elaine Risley. Like Yvonne's censored paintings of "revolutionary penises" (246), Elaine's paintings are a response to the Father's discursive experience. Her language is that of a visual medium and she counters the feminine speculations of oculo-centrism with *an other* personal image. Elaine may disavow the influence of the past in her work but even her medium is archaic: the use of *Trecento* egg tempera. (Considering the painting *Three Sofas* with its symbolic broken egg (Elaine), then her medium -- form -- certainly echoes her painterly content.) Indeed, form echoes content in a wider textual context, since the retrospective exhibition that Elaine rather grudgingly attends mirrors her imaginative and narrative retrospective of her own suppressed childhood. Both the discourse of her memory and that of her art constitute a subversive language, a visual text of revenge. Her intent, conscious or otherwise, would seem to be that of Cixous': "Now, I-woman [escapee] am going to blow up the Law; an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now, *in language*" (LM, 257). Her work's explosive potential is tantalisingly signalled in the interview with the feminist reporter. In an hilariously unco-operative exchange, Elaine establishes that the language of her work cannot be recuperated under any exclusive, totalising umbrella (especially the umbrella of sisterhood). But Elaine also signals the visceral intensity that colours her work and the discomfort she feels at galleries' sublimating effects. Galleries are "sanctimonious" places "*too like churches*" (85, my emphasis), where paintings are "sterilized, rendered safe and acceptable" (86). The sanctity of this ritual space is one that cannot be disturbed by "the smell of blood on the wall" (86). Elaine allows us one glimpse of this blood in the following description of *Rubber Plant: The Ascension* where Mrs Smeath's piety is cynically rewarded with Elaine's painterly "gift". The *papier collés* angels recall the feminine cut-outs that shaped Elaine's socialisation, a temporal locale that is reinforced by the textual conformity offered by a child's school stencil set. That the word *Heaven* is quite literally a floating signifier is also ironically appropriate. The scandalously parodic image of ascending "moral superiority" (57), bears little relation to the conventional images that these words would conjure. Re-contextualised, the Word is derisively undercut. In Elaine's view it is the *image* and not the Word that has the eternising power of life and death. The rhizomatic sestych she paints of her mother is, like all her work, a temporal fixation and a psychological fixation: "I made this right after she died. I suppose I wanted to bring her back to life. I suppose I wanted her timeless, though there is no such thing on earth. These pictures of her, like everything else, are drenched in time" (151).<sup>12</sup>

And time past is what colours her works. Bloody revenge is her hell-bent object in the series devoted to Mrs Smeath, a revenge fuelled by intense feelings of parental

betrayal. According to the weighty authority of Mrs Smeath, Elaine's victimised status is "God's punishment" for the heathen abnormality of her family (180). In an epiphanic moment, Elaine discovers that her treatment has had full and approving paternal sanction (since Mrs Smeath is another representative of the Father's Law). Her artistic sensibility registers a new and "ungodly" aspect: the palpable weight of hatred. Whilst Elaine is silent in the face of Mrs Smeath's treacherous words, her response is already forming in the language of images:

I have a brief, intense image of Mrs Smeath going through the *flesh-coloured wringer* of my mother's washing machine; legs first, bones cracking and flattening, skin and flesh squeezing up toward her head, which will pop in a minute like a huge balloon of blood.  
(180, my emphasis)

And Elaine's vision does not stop at the surface: "Her bad heart floats in her body like an eye; an evil eye, it sees me" (180). In contrast, when Elaine tries to picture the one to whom she prays in defiance of God, the Lady of Sorrows (182) and of Lost Things (198; 408) who will redeem her, she receives a positive image of Mrs Smeath's evil organ: "There it is, bright red, rounded with dark light around it, a blackness like luminous velvet. Gold comes out from the centre, then fades. It's the heart all right. It looks like my red plastic purse" (184). The quality rebounds into Elaine's art. Later, she strives to convey images that "breathe out light; a luminous flatness" (326). And Elaine's paintings shimmer with luminous hatred; a subversive pictorial displacement of image and Word. Elaine captures Mrs Smeath in vengeful recollections of her childhood: the horrific half-faced twin of *Leprosy*, the traitorous moment of AN•EYE•FOR•AN•EYE, and the penetrating striptease of *White Gift*. Blood on the wall. All are obscenely parodic but also revelatory. In the final painting, Elaine captures both the form and the Word that has betrayed her. Mrs Smeath's heart is laid bare: "reptilian, dark red, diseased" (352). As the stencilled Biblical adage beneath her image suggests, the kingdom of God is truly within: Mrs Smeath is the victim (and victimiser) of an internalised punitive paternal Word.<sup>13</sup>

Elaine's protection against Mrs Smeath's heart-felt malevolence -- her evil eye -- is contained within the heart shaped purse of her childhood: the cat's eye marble that gives the novel its title. Unlike her sado-masochistic acts, Elaine's cat's eye gives her something to hold onto that is not painful (155). It is a protective talisman that offers a way of seeing untainted by Learean blindness. Holding it, Elaine escapes from words into unemotive visions of "shapes", "sizes" and "colours" (141). Its gaze is impartial" (155). Following the illuminated visitation of the Lady who tenders annunciatory words of comfort, Elaine finds a renewed sense of resistance. Her strength combines with that of her marble to effect the rejection of the Law that nearly killed her: "I am indifferent to them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass" (193). Later, the



treasured cat's eye proffers the reflection of unobscured vision: "I look into it and see my life entire" (398). Thus, in the final painting significantly entitled *Unified Field Theory* -- the unified explanation of space/time that is the philosopher's stone of quantum physics -- the Virgin of Lost Things floats above the bridge of the dead bearing in her hands the symbol of liberating vision: "an oversized cat's eye marble, with a blue centre" (408).

In contrast to the evil eye of the pious Mrs Smeath, Elaine's cat's eye's vision is implicitly life-affirming; even in the midst of darkness cats' vision is not unduly hampered. Mrs Smeath's adherence to the wrathful vengeance of an Old Testament God is one that justifies her punitive vision. Yet as Stephen's death makes abundantly clear, it is a religion devoid of compassion: "He died of an eye for an eye, or someone's idea of it. He died of too much justice" (388). Although Elaine's retaliatory paintings of Mrs Smeath deride her investment in this blind Word, they are in many ways complicit with -- even usurp -- the Father's vengeful prerogative. Her vengeance is of the uncompromising order of childhood where sinful transgressions are writ large on the memory and the textual body. Compassionate understanding is, it would appear, a much later addition to the emotional vocabulary. As Joseph in "The Sin Eater" says, "Children have no charity; it has to be learned" (*DG*, 220).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, contemplating the paintings of Mrs Smeath, Elaine recognises the "considerable malice" that went into their creation (404). The desecrating mockery of this paternal representative is the metonymic rendering of His Word and also its erasure: "Mrs Smeath . . . . Blotting out God" (404). But the image is not all bad; indeed it is also suffused with the light of revelatory vision: "I put light into them too. . . I have said *Look* I have said *I see*" (404). For the first time Elaine recognises that compassion has tinted her visual recollections. The eyes she used to think of as "self-righteous", "piggy and smug" are also "the eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man" (405). The revenge that fuelled their creation is of the same sadistic order: "An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (405). Unintentionally, unconsciously, Elaine has tempered vengeance with charity; Mrs Smeath's image conveys the same sense of displacement that Elaine herself felt. Her realisation explains an earlier "mis-reading" of her intent: "It's good to see the aging female body treated with compassion, for a change" (348). Her visual deconstruction of Biblical Law also contains a positive re-writing of the Symbolic Word. Elaine's paintings, like her memory, are suffused with *différance*; whatever is present is always already marked by absence (even if it is unacknowledged). Her changed perceptions are mirrored in her latest five works, significantly concluding with the highly symbolic *Unified Field Theory*. In these works Elaine has abandoned her obsession with Mrs Smeath to focus on herself, her family, and others who have shown her formative kindnesses. (The importance of image over Word is subtly underlined by the inadequacy of Charna's descriptions in the guiding exhibition catalogue.) The paintings represent the

culmination of Elaine's artistic and speculative journey. In them, she has not arrested time as she was formerly so intent on doing, but translated the fluidity of her narrative and the space-time continuum into the liquid medium of a visual language: "I walk the room, surrounded by the time I've made, which is not a place; which is only a blur, the moving edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself, like a wave" (409).

Elaine, of course has one more ghost from the past to confront: Cordelia, the spectre who has loomed large throughout her retrospective. This meeting takes place on and in the concluding section entitled "Bridge". Returning to the scene of the crime Elaine's is not her previous "uneasy feeling" but the realisation of an unobscured vision; the bridge offers its previous safe passage over (and into) the world of the dead (75). In an imaginative exchange like that of an exorcism, Elaine feels again the emotions that accompanied Cordelia's scrutiny: "the same shame", "awkwardness"; "the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear" (419). But Elaine's dawning realisation is similar to that afforded by Mrs Smeath's similarly displaced status: "But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (419). Elaine finally transcends her victimised status, her complicity in Cordelia's projected emotions. In Kristevan terms, her self-analysis changes from that of "a scapegoat victim" to "the potentialities of *victim/executioner* which characterize each identity, each subject, each sex" ("Women's Time", 35). Elaine emerges from the submersion in a traumatic past with the recognition of her own responsibility for past, present and future. It is a typically Atwoodian observation and one that surfaces again and again in her work; the imperative need to recognise our own position as both victims and victimisers:

If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault -- it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. It will always be somebody else's fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes any responsibility for their life. And that is not only the Canadian stance toward the world but the usual female one. Look what a mess I am and it's all their fault.  
(Gibson, 22)<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Elaine finally responds with the forgiveness that she previously found intolerable, speaking the same words of comfort that characterised her own redemption (189): "*It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*" (419). Elaine's charity is an act that releases Cordelia *and* herself from the imprisoning world of nine-year-old children. Cordelia's role as Charon once constituted a malicious drama; now Cordelia is the bridge between Elaine's conscious and unconscious desires, between that world and this, between then and now. Now she is truly the ferryman to the afterlife (a life after the Father?; one that is beyond the phallus?). Elaine vanquishes the ghosts of the dead in the art that is her paintings and her narrative. Now her thoughts are tinted by a nostalgia for

both the past *and* the future. Her concluding comment is the positive illuminating acceptance of the hitherto unacceptable -- age, time and death:

Echoes of light, [her memories] shining out of the midst of nothing  
[experience but also creation, art, the book].

It's old light [the past], and there's not much of it. But it's  
enough to see by [the future].  
(421)

Atwood's project is not one that relegates the Father's Word to the dust from whence it sprang but a process of rejecting its destructive elements and embracing those that are beneficial. The Law is not the monolithic stone tablet of Biblical phrase but an orthopaedic structure that can be changed from within. Feminised, the Word and the image have an explosive effect. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine, like Lear, waits for the word from Cordelia that never comes, but, like Lear, she arrives instead at a personal insight (if not a dramatic anagorisis). The importance of the word is ignored. If Elaine is the Cordelian figure, the one who for most of *King Lear* is absent and silent, then this is Cordelia's story; the story of exile and the difficult path to forgiveness (a process that, in Shakespeare's play, is all too easily accounted for). Perhaps as Elaine says, it is much easier to forgive the father than it is to forgive the mother or the self: "Forgiving men is so much easier than forgiving women" (267). Considering her displaced treatment at the hands of the Father, it is hardly surprising that Elaine finds sisterhood a difficult concept. That her paintings are infused with a visionary light is, however, a positive thing in the midst of a disempowering darkness. Indeed, Atwood re-writes the heavy pessimism that characterises the conclusion of Shakespeare's drama, in which triumphal success is notably absent. *Cat's Eye* concludes with a reconciliation and a *flight* into the future. Suffering as a child from the effect of the Father's Law, as an adult Elaine recognises some wisdom in His Word: THE•GREATEST•OF•THESE•IS•CHARITY. She recognises her complicity but also, like the narrator in *Surfacing*, the need *not* to be a victim. With the intercessionary aid of the Lady, Elaine re-writes the apocalyptic judgement of the Father's Word in the register of images and personalised revelation. Her art, like Atwood's, has many faces; a visceral language of blood but also, implicitly, of tears. In the Derridean sense, she solicits the Word ("*Différance*", 21), shaking it with a subversive corporeal intensity. As Offred implies, language is "a habit", a uniform, that is hard to break (*HT*, 34), but that can be transgressed and transformed. It can be unbuttoned to reveal the body beneath. Atwood's relationship to language is a teasing flight, an enticingly feminine ascension. Confronting the Father, she is neither violently overcome nor subtly seduced by the power of His Word. Rather, it is *she* who is doing the seducing.

# NOTES

- 1 Barbara Godard also discusses the intangibility of paternal prohibition in these terms, in her article "Ex-centricques, Eccentric, *Avant-Garde*".
- 2 Like poetic caesura, the page break emphasises this *volte face*. If unintended, it is a fortunate coincidence.
- 3 "Implicitly", because the poem is, in fact, ungendered.
- 4 I get the sense of the author heading up her page with the story's title, waiting for the words to come and getting side-tracked into a discussion of the word she has just been contemplating.
- 5 That Rennie finally realises the full bodily import of this word is textually signalled by its (new) un-italicised status.
- 6 The Aunts of course are not silent, but their rote mouthings of the Father's Word perhaps show them as greater victims. Like Janine, they are completely subjugated.
- 7 This episode is foreshadowed by the short fiction "Fainting" in *Murder in the Dark*, 16.
- 8 Earlier, Elaine says of her family: "How long did we live this way, like nomads on the far edges of the war?" (25) Considering her later experience "the war" is not only a singular reference.
- 9 Again, an earlier short fiction echoes throughout this episode. In "Horror Comics" (*MD*, 13), the female narrator tells "[her] friend C" exactly the same thing.
- 10 It is a specifically Cordelian image, one that is evoked time and time again. After Elaine's betrayal of her imprisoned friend another symbolic dream proffers a picture of a mutilated theatrically clothed shop mannequin bearing its own cloth-bound severed head -- Cordelia's (360).
- 11 The painting is of course a reflection of Elaine's own mixed feelings about her "best friend". The death mask could be her own and the reproach in Cordelia's eyes could be due to her own friendly treachery.
- 12 Considering Atwood's own concern with art and artistry, her own personal history and present age, and the linkage between the family of *Cat's Eye* and that of *Surfacing* and "Unearthing Suite" (*BE*), it is difficult to swallow Atwood's adamant statement of authorial non-correspondence, hook, line and sinker. In any case, the cautionary admonition of the frontispiece is in itself a parody of a parody. This is a fictive world, but in the world of Atwood, we are *all* fictive.
- 13 The phrase is similarly ironically invoked in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the handmaids are drilled in an oppressive re-writing of this Biblical assertion: "Gilead is within you" (133).
- 14 The Virago edition I refer to is not a transposition of the original McClelland and Stewart publication. Here, "The War in the Bathroom" and "Rape Fantasies" have been replaced by "Betty" and this story, "The Sin Eater".
- 15 The preceding discussion is also illuminating. Unlike her later, more guarded interviews, Atwood is here uncharacteristically (youthfully?) candid.

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